

Erinnerungen
aus seiner Heimat
v. David Toews

MEMORIES OF HIS HOMELAND

David Toews

translated from the original hand-written German memoir

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Public Domain

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

My wife's great uncle and aunt, David and Katja Toews, were the most distinguished guests at our wedding in 1980. They had recently left the Soviet Union to live in West Germany. On arrival at the Winnipeg airport, Canada customs officers asked if they were bringing any gifts. "Kien Gift!" was their earnest reply, mistaking the English word "gift" for the German word for poison.

But uncle David had brought with him a most important gift, the gift of memory.

Fifteen years later, this gift in tangible form arrived in the mail, 372 pages of manuscript, beautiful handwriting covering each page from edge to edge, and from top to bottom. It betrayed an economy that had no room for excess white space. There were few corrections or additions. It even contained some poetry in his mother's own hand, and some traditional scissor work.

It wasn't the first time this memoir had been in Canada. Uncle David had brought it in 1980 to share with his family. Like most writers, he received mixed reviews. "It is only David's ideas" was the general caution.

Unlike most writers, uncle David sets out his inevitable personal bias at the very beginning, as if to remind us that we all have points of view on the common story of our family, and that everyone has stories to tell. Such stories illuminate the dry data of genealogy transforming it into the richness of lives we might otherwise never know.

This gift of David's memoir can be poison if we use it to make some point that dishonours the author, the memories, or the tradition. He obviously did not want it to be poison, but neither could he prevent it from being used that way. This is the problem of history. It can be a mine rich with treasure, or a deep hole from which to draw out the demons dwelling in darkness.

Not everything is accurate as he admits on page one. Not everything is chronological as he also admits. This volume seeks to present David Toews' work in his own words. Any clarification explanation, addition or correction is made in the footnotes. Those are also a work in progress and not exhaustive, seeking to make the content clear and corresponding to what is generally known.

Unfortunately, it is not my role to defend or to advance any agenda, but simply to present this manuscript to you with the hope that with sensitivity and understanding we will look together at these glimpses into the past.

The insertions beginning on page 105 were found in the original manuscript. The family trees and photos have been added to support the text.

I want to thank David's nephew, Henry Toews, to whom he entrusted the manuscript upon its completion. And my mother-in-law, Anna Janzen (nee Toews), for her labour of patient love in translating that portion of the text completed before her death in 2019. Thanks also to Sigmund Jakob-Michael Stephan, PhD German student at the University of Waterloo, who completed the translation amid the inopportune conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Those who have contributed photos and anecdotes must also receive hearty thanks.

May generations yet unborn be blessed and challenged by the memories left by David Toews.

Dave Sapelak

May 2022

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

TO THE READER

[1]¹ The following accounts are my memoirs from years gone by beginning in my childhood home. They are stories told by my grandparents and siblings, bequeathed to me in my childhood and youth, the way I understood it, and presented in the way they stick in my mind.

It is written for a particular readership of my immediate and extended family. These are my memoirs for my family. It is the family of Johann Peter Toews from Nordheim, now Marynivka², a village belonging to the Memrik settlement of the Mennonites. Nordheim was governed under the Ekaterinoslav Province, the seat of government being Yuzovka, then then Stalino, now the city of Donetsk. It was in Ukraine, Russia, now the Soviet Union³. It was 150 kilometres north of Halenstadt, then Mariiupil', now the city of Zhdanov on the Sea of Asov⁴. During the war of 1941-1945, Nordheim was destroyed by fire and doesn't exist. You cannot read this writing as a complete family history because it is only my life experience and that of other family members that have been told to me. There was no family chronicle or any statistics kept by my parents or siblings, so they cannot be used. If such documents ever existed, they would have been destroyed when the Mennonites were dragged away to Siberia during the Soviet period.

Yes, now I do remember that in my mother's family Bible, which was 25 x 20 x 8 cm trimmed in gold with a lock and key, she had a certain number of pages decorated with flowers where she kept a family chronicle. My father had entered the first thing with his beautiful handwriting using Joshua 24:15, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." This chronicle would be very helpful at this time, but where could this be? I don't know. [2] So I have to depend on my mind and take out of it what memories I can.

¹ Numbers in brackets are the beginning of pages in the manuscript.

² Place names given are mixed Russian and Ukrainian spellings.

³ Since 1991 Ukraine has been an independent state.

⁴ Henry Toews was the first visitor from the west to the village of Marynivka (Маринівка) in 1994. Dave and Sharon Sapelak visited there in 2004; Sharon's siblings, Don, Ted and James Janzen visited in 2005.

Because I was the second youngest of my siblings, I can imagine that many of these events could have been seen differently through the eyes of my older brothers and sisters. Some of the dates too may not be quite right, and some of the events may not be in consecutive order, which of course doesn't make a great deal of difference in the long run, and doesn't take away from what happened.

As already stated, I come from a Mennonite family. My parents were very strong Mennonites. They quite possibly were the fifth generation of the Mennonites since the Reformation. Not every one of our big family, children and grandchildren, could possibly know the rationale that determined why our great grandparents left Germany,¹ our homeland. They also could not perhaps understand the Anabaptists, why they were homeless, why they fled from place to place, and why the Mennonites over 200 years ago fled for very particular beliefs, crossing a continent into Russia.

In order to understand a little of why these people were forced to live in such adverse circumstances, I am going to go back more than 450 years to the beginning of the Mennonite faith. This period I will only give in shortened form. It will possibly have errors but not intentionally, because I am writing only what I remember having no original references. I, therefore, beg your understanding. My memoirs are in this order:

PART ONE

1. Out of the Pre-Reformation time
- 2 The Anabaptists
3. The Mennonites
4. My Grand Parents—Father's Side
5. My Grand Parents—Mother's Side
6. My Parents
7. My Memories of my Siblings

PART TWO

My Autobiography

PART THREE²

Time and Circumstances Determine Character

PART FOUR

My View on Religion

¹ The "Germany" that the ancestors left in the 1700s was the Kingdom of Prussia. It is not the Germany David returns to in 1978. But the mythology of Germany as homeland permeates his memoir. See page 323.

² David's intention to write Parts 3 and 4 is indicated here. But the manuscript only includes Parts 1 and 2. It ends in January 1995 at age 85.

PART ONE—CHAPTER I

OUT OF PRE-REFORMATION TIMES

[3] The idea of returning to the practices of early Christianity had already been raised in the creed of the Waldensians, founded by Petrus Waldus from Lyon. In 1217, they founded a lay movement whose principles did not entirely adhere to the doctrines of the Catholic Church. For instance, they adopted the ideal of poverty for mendicant orders.

The Catholic Church persecuted the Waldensians arbitrarily and violently, and the Waldensian wars broke out. Nevertheless, there existed Waldensian protestant churches in Germany from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. There are still Waldensian congregations in Italy and South America. (I think there are about 30,000 members according to the information available in 1970.)

In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe put forward a revision of the Catholic faith. His followers, the Lollards, founded sects in England and Holland. The Catholic Church persecuted the Lollards too.

In the fifteenth century, Jan Hus, the rector of the University of Prague, put forward his doctrines, partially based upon Wycliffe's beliefs. Hus went to the Council of Constance, trusting in King Sigismund's letter of safe conduct. However, he was burnt at the stake in Constance for his refusal to recant his beliefs that Catholics considered heretical. The Taborites sect emerged in the Czech lands. This event led to devastating conflicts since the Taborites were also an anti-feudal movement. This was brutally vanquished with the help of the Catholic Church. In that time, Catholic wrath increased to such a degree that in England the body of Wycliffe was exhumed and burnt.

In the aftermath, the Hussites, the Bohemian (Moravian) Brethren emerged who rejected oaths, private property, and military service in their creed. They emigrated from the Czech lands to Poland and Prussia. The rest of the Bohemian Brethren evolved into the Moravian church¹, which Ludwig Zinzendorf began to supervise. They considered themselves strict pietists.

¹ *Brüdergemeinde der Herrnhuter*

Resistance to the despotism of the Catholic Church gained momentum into the sixteenth century. The era of Protestantism began when Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on 31 October 1517. The Reformation had broken out.

About the same time, it broke out in several Western-European places guided by different reformers. For this reason, they could not help but disagree on substantial questions of faith. This led to rivalries among the Reformers and, as a result, different protestant communities immediately developed during the substantial restructuring of the church, thereby significantly hampering the united struggle of the reform movement. This irritated the masses to the advantage of the Catholic Church.

The first essential communities of the Protestant world were: Lutheranism in Germany guided by Martin Luther (1483-1546); Calvinism in France, but mainly in Basel, developed by Jan Calvin (1509-1564); Zwinglianism, which was headed by Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich.

PART ONE—CHAPTER 2

THE ANABAPTISTS

[4] During the Reformation, the peasant war broke out in Central and Southern Germany (1524-25) sparked by anti-feudalism and religious motives. Thomas Müntzer was a leader in the peasant wars during the time of the fights between the peasants and the princes. The main religious motive of the peasants was the question of baptisms. Even though the three reformers mentioned above were critical about several principles of the Catholic Church, they did not exclude infant baptism from their creed. However, that was exactly the main difference between the peasant Reformers and the others who aimed at changing the Christian religion. Münster and his followers adopted adult baptism on religious principle. They revoked their own infant baptism, and decide to be baptized as adults, i.e. they were re-baptized. As a result, they obtained the name Anabaptist¹, derived from Greek for re-baptize. This was the way Anabaptism came about. Anabaptist movements emerged independently from each other in three regions. They had different reasons for becoming Anabaptists. But they had a common rejection of infant baptism and endorsed adult baptism. The so-called German Anabaptists founded their community in Zwickau guided by Nikolaus Storch. They were peaceful because they consider themselves pacifists and did not become engaged in war. Yet Thomas Müntzer (1495-1523) partook in a revolutionary movement, which was first friendly but later hostile to Martin Luther. Müntzer organized the fight by the most impoverished layer of peasantry. The army of the princes then oppressed them so that Müntzer settled in Thuringia, where he sought to establish a center for the struggle for Reformation. He was prevented from finding rest there because of his radical agitation. In 1525, Thomas Müntzer was imprisoned and executed in nearby Frankenhausen.

The Swiss Anabaptists were a group of the followers of Zwingli who distanced themselves from Zwingli's leadership because they did not consider him radical enough.

¹ *Wiedertäufer*

Zwingli was taken captive in a battle that the Catholic Cantons forced. He was then severely tortured and executed, and his body was burned. Zwingli had been fighting against the Anabaptists until his death. His followers later joined the Calvinists. Part of Swiss Anabaptists escaped to Austria and Czech. Their leader, Melchior Hoffmann, was imprisoned, and probably died there in 1533. His followers remained in Austria, adhering to his principles, for about the next hundred years until the community gradually dissolved.

A third Anabaptist community was the lower-Rhenish. The center of this community was Münster with Johann Mathis as its leader. These Anabaptists went to war, and held their center for sixteen months, where they founded a community (so-called Zion). Mathis fell a battle, [5] and was succeeded by Johann Bokkelson, who adopted the name Johann von Leiden (after his Dutch native town). The pugnacious Anabaptists did things in their zeal which appeared, even to their sympathizers, as obscure, or even unacceptable. They carried the communalization of property so far that they even held their wives in common in building their so-called Zion. Their program was widely rejected until they faced the penalty of community destruction in 1534, and von Leiden's beheading.

As a result of their defeat, the dispersed Anabaptists renounced their pugnacious and revolutionary zeal. Instead, they enclosed themselves in small communities, but this decision did not protect them against persecution since the Catholic Church severely forbade the practice of re-baptizing. Whoever rejected infant baptism was subjected to capital punishment. Consequently, the Anabaptist movement appeared to be unsuccessful and did not succeed in establishing their own church in Germany or Holland.

PART ONE—CHAPTER 3

THE MENNONITES

During the Peasant War and struggles for Reformation, Menno Simons (1495-1561) entered the scene. In 1531, he, being a Catholic priest, renounced Catholicism and joined the Anabaptist movement. He aimed at convening the dispersed Anabaptists and proposed a pacifist program for the foundation of an Anabaptist brotherhood. In 1532, Menno Simons formulated articles of faith in the Dutch town Dort. It contained a paragraph about the nonresistance of potential members of the brotherhood. The publication of this declaration provoked an immediate response that turned out to be unfavourable to Simons' followers.

Which state could renounce compulsory military service without losing its protection at the same time? Who would gain wide sympathy of his compatriots if he distanced himself from them to the degree that he even refused to defend his homeland in the case of an emergency? Additionally, the Catholic Church systematically stood against Anabaptism with its full power.

Anabaptists who became Mennonites were unable to gain the sympathy of their compatriots because of their radical viewpoint. The convictions of the new sect were disdained. Mennonites were considered harmful to the country and society; they were harassed, persecuted, and declared illegal. Their enemies persecuted the Mennonites not only in Holland but also in Germany. The Inquisition brutally persecuted them. Thus, Mennonites were forced to leave their home, but the Inquisition found them wherever they appeared. The life of the Mennonites became unsteady; they needed to flee if they wanted to express their faith openly, and be baptized to join the faith community of their parents. [7] Polish Roman Catholics began to identify the Mennonite church as a revolutionary sect, an impression that likely led to more mutual misunderstandings.

Conflicts emerged among the Mennonite communities themselves. Mennonites were theoretically only baptized on confession of their personal faith, and then admitted to their faith community. When a young person had gained the age of independence, and was

unwilling to adopt the Mennonite faith, they had to withdraw from the Mennonite brotherhood. The numbers of these dissenting young people increased. What could be done? Disagreement arose among the Mennonites.

The unity of the former Anabaptists who went to Poland¹ decreased due to several controversial questions. Conflicts began to gnaw at the core of the Mennonite faith. New groups emerged with different names. For example, Waterlands[?], Halonists[?], Anosteliands[?], Equalists[?]. The characteristics of tribal identity became more and more noticeable. As Menno Simons had brought together the dispersed Anabaptists, the Mennonites had formed one unity under the banner of faith. Trustfulness and peacefulness had replaced tribalism. In this way, they had shared the burden inflicted on them by harassment and persecution. They had helped each other to survive. After this time, they became settled again due to the peaceful life in Poland. According to their taste and whims, the seeds of tribal conflicts, which their forefathers had sown, came out again after 150-170 years. Tribal conflicts had not faded away but had just subsided, similar to a hibernating bear during times of hardship. However, problems were stirred up among the former heretics in the waking of spring. At first, the spark of conflict was barely noticeable and only became plain in incidental, minor animosities, which sometimes evolved into resentments. The quarrel flared up between the Flams (respectively Vlamen or Vlaamen), who originated from Belgium and Holland, and the Frisians, whose original homeland was on the German North Sea coast, in the most salient and fierce manner.² The two old Germanic tribes even brought their seemingly irreconcilable conflict to Russia later. The initial reason for their mutual aversion is hard to understand nowadays.

The discord among the Mennonites, their greed and arrogant attitude towards the Polish people, increasingly weakened the reputation which the refugees and persecuted used to enjoy with their patrons. Besides this, the Polish people deemed the wealth of these Mennonite foreigners to be a threat against their interest. So, the Polish government forbid the Mennonites to stay in Poland³. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Mennonites were forced to leave Poland because of their unpardonable negligence. Christian judgment should have made them thankful. Where could the Mennonites go at this moment?

Some farsighted Mennonite families already penetrated Russian territory individually from time to time, without permission of the Russian Government. [8] Inquiries were done which turned out to be futile. The Mennonites had to return. The pietist count Nikolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf also tried to settle his Moravian church in Livonia⁴ at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Czarina Elizabeth⁵ (i.e. the daughter of Czar Peter the Great) had

¹ Mennonites from the North Sea coast began settling in what is now Poland (part of which was known as Prussia) in the mid-1500s.

² Scholarship shows that these two factions were not actually geographical, but based on theological differences. Flemish and Frisian became party monikers.

³ To remain meant to accept the requirement for military service that went against their pacifist belief.

⁴ Livonia is an area of present-day Latvia and Estonia on the shore of the Baltic Sea.

⁵ Elizabeth Petrovna b. 1709. Empress of Russia from 1741 until her death in 1762.

a hostile attitude towards Protestantism, and ordered these intruders removed from Russia as fast as possible. Furthermore, she ruled that they were not allowed to enter Russia in the future.

It is widely known, however, that monarchs come and go. Catherine the Great (born 1729, Empress of Russia from 1762-1796) became Czarina after the death of Elizabeth. She was the princess of Anhalt-Zerbst and was the widow of the murdered Peter II. Catherine was raised Lutheran, but she was forced to become Russian Orthodox. From Peter the Great's reign until this time, Russia was capable of expanding its territories and incorporating new countries into its empire. These new territories needed to be settled with a submissive population, and Catherine wanted to have peasants in particular. She heard about Mennonites' agricultural competence. Two mutually favourable developments occurred: Catherine's intention to populate the newly acquired steppe lands with a productive peasantry, and the Mennonites need of a place to settle after being forced from Poland.

The negotiations between the two partners went quickly even though they were not easy. The reason for this was that the Russians were aware of how the cohabitation of German Mennonites and Western Slavs (i.e. the Poles) had unfolded. They were knowledgeable about the changes among Mennonites during their two-hundred-year-long pilgrimage in Poland. Russian observers did their research. In short, the Russians were compelled to be cautious about the terms under which Mennonites would be allowed to settle in Russia. They noticed that the Polish people had been considerate when they had allowed the Mennonites to settle. However, the Poles had lost control because of the Mennonites' tenacity and persistence.

From the very beginning of negotiations, Russia made it plain to the Mennonite legates that they were welcome in Russian territories with a clear purpose under concrete conditions, not because of pity. Mennonites should help build and support agriculture in the vast Russian empire. The contract that permitted Mennonites to immigrate to Russia contained many restrictions, but these are the three main clauses that were accompanied by numerous sub-clauses:

1. The reason and the condition for the immigration of Mennonites to Russian is the development of Russian agriculture
2. [9] Mennonites were not allowed to build industrial or commercial businesses.
3. Mennonites were severely forbidden from intruding in affairs of the Orthodox Church, or exerting religious influence, or any other sort of influence on the Russian population as Mennonites had done previously.

In my opinion, it does not add to the merits of the representatives of the soon-to-be Russian Mennonites that these persons, chosen from the prospective immigrant community, did not take the contract between the Russian government and the Mennonites seriously. That always happened wherever the Mennonites settled. From my point of view, there is no excuse for Russian Mennonite representatives for not informing the majority of

Mennonites about the contract with the Russian government, in particular about its stipulations regarding the relationship of the Mennonites and the Russian population, as it turned out later. Indeed, the Mennonites oftentimes infringed the terms of the contract and their obligations to the Russian nation. Why do we still speak about it? It does not matter how you interpret the events. The Mennonites, like all other Germans in Russia, eventually had to face the revenge of the Russian nation, or of the Communist Party of Russia (I think they had to do it at that point). It is generally known how their revenge appeared.

Let us return to the Mennonites in Russia at the beginning of their immigration. According to the subclauses of their contract, the Mennonites had to make big farms. A single farm should be 65 hectares. When the size of a family increased the land should not be re-allocated. This stipulation resulted in negative consequences for the immigrants over time and turned out to be disastrous for some families.

At first glance, this stipulation might look beneficial, but if you take a closer look, its downside will become obvious.

Firstly, according to Mennonite custom at this time, the oldest son (or the oldest daughter in a son-less family) was heir. In the case that a father did not have the wealth to gift all his sons with 65 hectares of land—and the Mennonites were oftentimes blessed with many children—the younger children remained landless, and thus were forced to serve their older siblings or to leave peasantry to become a worker or a servant. At the beginning of their colonization in 1864, Mennonites had to pay 50 rubels for one dessiatin¹, whereas the price of a dessiatin increased to 400 rubel by 1910 according to the History of the Memrik Settlement. In this way the oldest child soon became wealthy, whereas the younger became working class. This situation was the reason for inevitable family conflicts.

Secondly, in cases where the daughter was the heir, it frequently resulted in a marriage of conveniences in which economic benefit was the main reason for the marriage, and not love for the other person. Wherever such a marriage occurred, it paved the way for such grief and sorrow that a marriage could fall apart.

[10] The contract between the Mennonites and the Czarist government was concluded, and ratified. The immigration of Mennonites to Russia began with those from Poland around 1770. Later, Mennonites from other parts of Germany and Holland also immigrated to Russia. Many non-Mennonite Germans also immigrated to Russia a little bit later, for example those who became the Volga Germans. Not all Mennonite settlers arrived at the same time, and a lot of them had to cope with difficulties. They moved with horses and wagons on bad roads situated in marshy and waste landscapes. It was a long way to the location of the prospective settlements, and settlers made slow progress. Autumn and winter weather caught them, and they had to make halts during their journey. Forage for the horses and food became scarce. Both horses and people became sick along the way, and some died. The several waves of Mennonite immigration ended at the time of Czar Alexander the II about 1870—1875.

¹ A *dessiatin* is approximately equivalent to 2.702 English acres or 1.09 hectares.

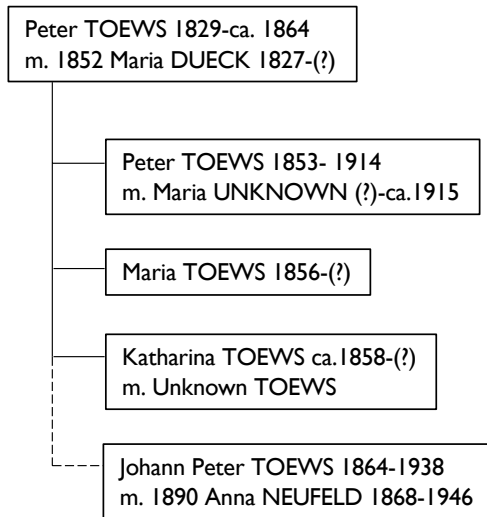
Memories of His Homeland

Many Mennonites brought their belongings to Russia. Some were affluent; others arrived at their land completely impoverished. However, all Mennonites were probably certain that they would be opening a new page in Mennonite history by coming into the Russia Empire, the largest land area in the world. They certainly achieved, if not surpassed this goal. Two new chapters could be written about the small Mennonite population. One chapter would be about the “rise” of the Mennonites. I put rise in quotation marks since I think that the so-called rise of the Mennonites only concerns the most irrelevant aspect according to true Christian principles, namely material growth, the increase of wealth. However, this sort of wealth hinders the true advancement of religious life. The other chapter would chronicle their nearly complete decline in terms of material wealth, and physical wellbeing. Mennonites were entirely deprived of their belongings in Russia and murdered everywhere—on the collective farms, in the concentration camps, and in the *Trudarmiya* (the forced labor army) during the Second World War.

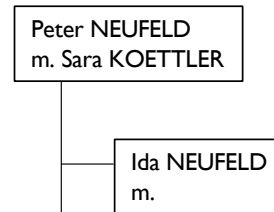
Speaking about Mennonite religious life, several Mennonites became Baptists. Some of the Mennonite families that survived, lost their religious faith completely. This is how the decline of the Russian Mennonites looked.

Let us return to the beginning of the history of Mennonites in Russia for the moment. As already mentioned, the crisis regarding the distribution of land was one of the main concerns. Mennonites frequently had to find new land for their offspring. Despite these efforts, the number of Mennonite children steadily increased. This forced some Mennonites to immigrate to the cities to become artisans, to start businesses, or work in industries, even though the contract forbade it. If they somehow had the opportunity to farm somewhere again, they left the cities. Our grandparents and parents belonged to that group.

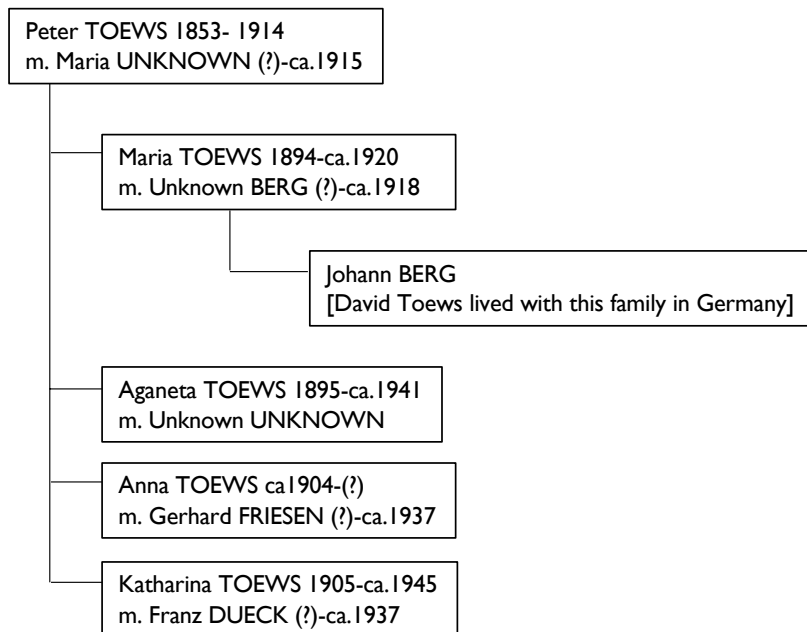
Paternal Grandparents



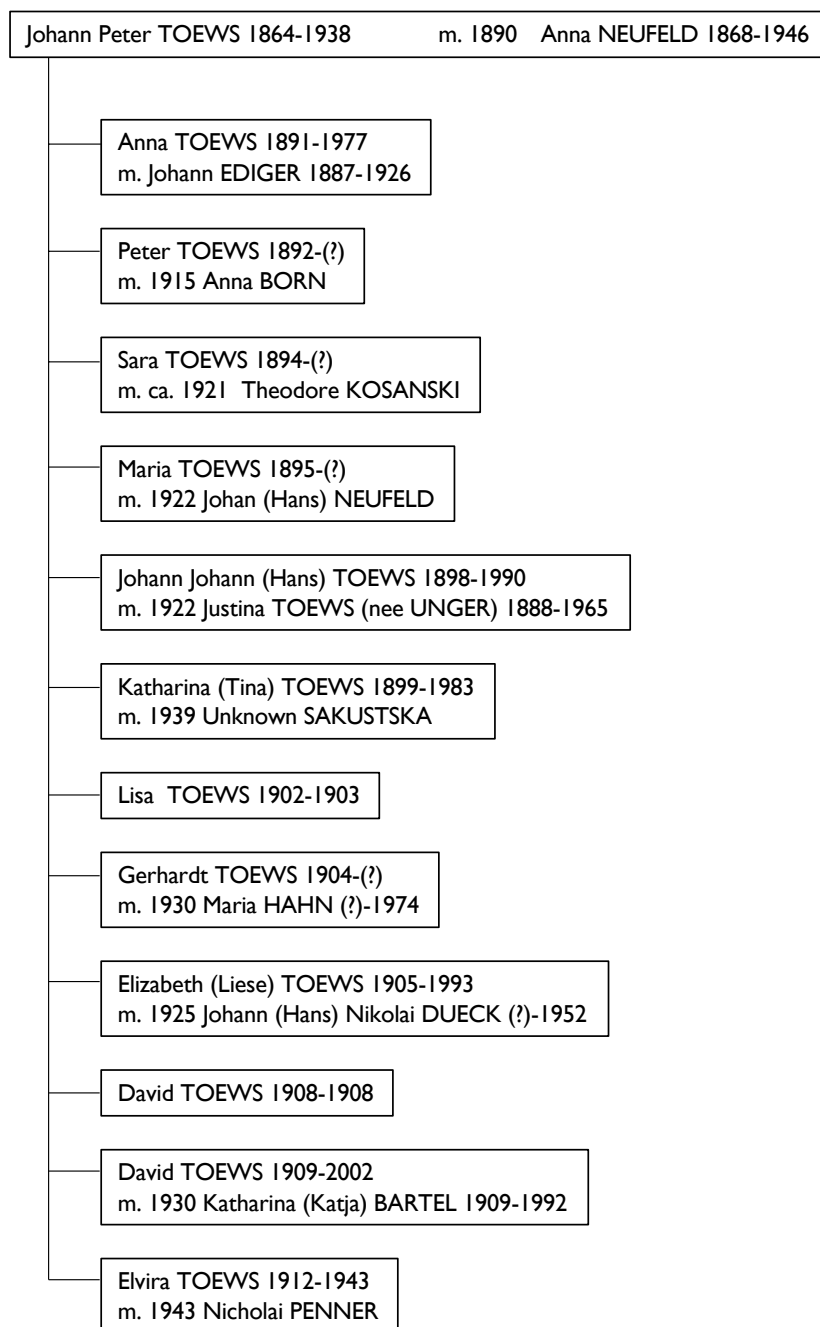
Maternal Grandparents



Uncle Peter's Family



My Parents' Family



PART ONE—CHAPTER 4

OUR GRANDPARENTS: FATHER'S SIDE—UNCLE PETER

[11] On father's side our grandfather, Peter Toews, was born 3 May 1829, in Holland¹. From there he went directly to Russia and took up residency in the small village of Petershagen² in the Molotschansk District, Melitapol province, Ukraine. Many Mennonite villagers were already settled in that area. In the neighbouring village of Altonau³, he got to know Maria Dueck, born 11 May 1827. They were married 30 December 1852, and had four children: Peter, Maria, Katharina, and Johann. I don't know when the three oldest were born and grandfather Peter Toews must have died young. Grandmother must not have reached old age either because their youngest son Johann was born on 28 November 1864. (See my last conversation with mother and her explanation.) Peter and Maria Toews were not able to acquire their own farm⁴. Mother told me that grandfather became a tailor in the city of Berdiansk (today Osypenko on the Sea of Azov)⁵ and grandmother helped him with his work. I have never been able to ascertain how and when my grandparents died or where they were buried. I was never able to find out about Aunt Maria.

Aunt Katharina immigrated to Siberia⁶ during that time. She apparently also married a Toews and a few sons survived from this family. We very, very seldom received letters from Aunt Katharina in my recollection. Father was always extremely happy for them because he loved his sister very much according to mother. In 1927 things were going fairly well for our family during this new economic policy of the Communist Party, so my father

¹ It is unlikely that Peter Toews originated in Holland. He was most likely from West Prussia around the city of Danzig (now the north west corner of Poland and the city of Gdansk). Many Mennonites from that region emigrated to the villages of the Molotschna colony.

² Kutuzivka, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine in 2021. (Kutuzuvka in many histories.)

³ Travneve, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine in 2021.

⁴ Subdividing land for new immigrants and children of residents was illegal, so people who had no right to land are referred to as "landless" Mennonites. Those who could not receive land for farming, took up a trade, either inside the colony, or beyond.

⁵ Berdiansk, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Ukraine in 2021—46°45'35"N 36°47'04"E

⁶ Siberia was a very general term meaning any place east of the Ural Mountains, Asiatic Russia as opposed to European Russia. Several Mennonite colonies existed there.

visited this sister in the area of Omsk. She was already widowed and lived very comfortably. Despite the fact that they were very happy to see each other, upon father's return a complete silence descended on this relationship of more than 50 years. They were unable to communicate.

We got to know uncle Peter with his family in our home village of Nordheim. As the oldest son of his family, he was on the list of the landless out of Molotschna, the mother colony. Molotschna had acquired an area they called Memrik where 10 villages were planned. This parcel was north of Mariupol and west of its capital, Yusovka, later Stalino¹. In one of these planned villages named Nordheim, the young immigrant, uncle Peter, had drawn lots for a piece of land where he built his house. His younger brother, Johann, arrived about 1880/81². Johann, who was my father, was 17 years old, healthy and strong. Both brothers were carpenters. They had very good prospects since they were settling in a newly founded village. We think of a carpenter as building buildings, but back then, carpenters also built wagons, furniture, etc.

The relationship between Johann and uncle Peter was not the best. I only have some clear recollections of uncle Peter as a sickly old man. He lay down much, coughed more, and smoked even more, which probably caused his sick lungs.

In the first years of the settlement, Johann lived with uncle Peter. They had been unable to build a full house with three rooms, kitchen and barn. [12] (Uncle Peter's family lived in this tiny house until the Germans were sent to Siberia in 1941.) Our father lived with this his brother's family for 10 years until he got married in 1890.

Four daughters were born to uncle Peter: Maria born in 1894/95, Aganeta in 1895/96, Anna in 1904, and Katharina about 1905. Uncle Peter's wife, aunt Maria, was a loving and compassionate woman. I, and my younger sister, Elvira, remember her well. We visited a few times, and every visit was a special occasion for us at age four and five. In 1914 uncle Peter died. Soon after, in 1915/16, Aunt Maria also died. The four sisters stayed a fairly long time without any male farm hand, but there were reasons.

Maria, the oldest, was a very good housekeeper, handsome but sick with lung problems. She was very much like her mother, very well liked and always had kind words for everyone. She often came to visit our family and was much the same age as my sisters Sara and Maria. Because of her unsteady health, she was married late in life to a widower named Berg who had a very cute and special daughter. This child was fairly tiny and learned very well in school. She was a bit younger than I, probably born in 1910. (Later I'll talk about this special girl.) Maria was a good mother to this child. Tragically, her husband was killed during the Revolution of 1918-19. Then Maria married a man who understood farming. He was also very careful for Maria's weak physical condition, but for some reason marriages didn't occur then for the other girls (Maria's sisters, especially

¹ Donetsk in 2021.

² The land for Memrik was purchased in 1885 for the settlement of 221 landless families in 10 villages.

Aganeta)¹. This marriage didn't last long either since Maria got very sick and died. Her husband didn't stay in that house.

With Maria's death, all the joy had gone from the house. Both the will and ability to keep peace, joy and togetherness was lacking. The two younger sisters had to deal with a lot of difficulties, but despite this, they were good and loving girls. (They were the ages of my brother Gerhard and sister Liese.) Both married and established good families. Their men Gerhard Friesen, Anna's husband, and Franz Dueck, Tina's husband, lost their lives during Stalin's terror. They were sentenced to Siberia and died there. The three sisters, each having one child, were deported to Siberia during WWII. On the way, Aganeta was killed during a bombing raid. Katharina later starved to death. Anna survived WWII and died at a very old age in Siberia. Her son Johann was allowed to immigrate to Germany and we meet every once in a while.

Honestly, I have to say that there was very little mention about my father's parents or siblings in our house. [13] There was never friction between our family and uncle Peter's family because we always dealt with each other very politely and correctly, just like we did with any other family. But we would seldom ask after the other family with any great affection. If we met each other, we would greet each other in just the same way as any other family from the village. But our "How are you?"—which can mean so much when it comes from the depth of your heart, and with relatives could be a sign of concern for each other out of our mutual belonging—was hardly ever used and mostly omitted. During conversations about uncle Peter and his family, no prejudices were noticed because they were just not talked about. Mother especially was very concerned not to go into detail during discussions, although I only realized it later. Father was always quiet. Later on, I noticed avoidance of this sibling relationship was quite common in our community among the younger people. (I hadn't noticed it when I was still a young child.) I reasoned that the lack of visiting was the fact that there was no one at that household for me to play with. When I was small, I would sometimes go to aunt Maria because she would give me walnuts or some other treat, but now...

In spite of that, for years my sister Leise and I sang in the same choir as they did. My uncle's family belonged to the Mennonite Church and the girls had attended membership classes and joined the church. Most of my brothers and sisters, and my parents, were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church. But this difference was never discussed. I had a hard time to figure out the reason for the state of relations between our families, especially after aunt Maria's death. Sometime, maybe I would understand. The relationship between our families, especially after aunt Maria's death, was steady but cool. An explanation will come at a different place, although deductions are possible at this point.

¹ Probably the shortage of men occurred because of WWI and the 1917 Revolution.

PART ONE – CHAPTER 5

**OUR GRANDPARENTS:
MOTHER’S SIDE – AUNT IDA**

[15] Our grandparents on mother’s side also came from the landless Mennonites.

Grandfather Peter Neufeld was born 2 December 1843, I don’t know where. In his youth he became a blacksmith and spent his time in the village of Pordenau¹ in the Molotschna Colony. Looking for a steadier and better paying job, he went to the city of Berdyansk (today Osypenko)² on the Sea of Azov, where he settled. In Berdyansk he got to know a girl named Sara who was a maid to the German consul.

Sara Koettler was born in 1844 in the village of Kronsweide³, in the Kitschkas area of the Saporozhye Region (Old Colony), by the Dnieper River. Her parents were landless farmers and died young. Sara was an only child and was placed in the house of the German consul by her trustee. Now in Berdyansk, destiny caused smithy Peter Neufeld to meet the consul’s maid, Sara Koettler. Peter came out of the New Colony and Sara, the Old Colony. Both had dreams of owning land and becoming farmers again. When the consul’s wife realized that both of them hoped to acquire land as soon as possible, she suggested that Sara should study midwifery. Naturally Sara decided to do it, and, at the consul’s expense, studied midwifery and homeopathy. Her teachers were from Germany. Our grandmother was also supplied with books and information on how to get all her medications out in the

¹ Panfilivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine, in 2021.

² Berdyans’k in 2021. 46°45’35”N 36°47’04”E

³ Kronsweide was one of the eight original villages of the Chortitza Colony founded in 1790. The Soviet-era name was Vladimirovka.

Memories of His Hometown

rural countryside. Sara and Peter were married in Berdyansk on November 28, 1866. It just so happened that their wedding day was the birthday of their future son-in-law, our father, something that no one could know.

After much work in Berdyansk, our grandparents were able to take over a mill, and their savings were reduced dramatically. In their first year, two daughters were born, Ida in 1867, and Anna in September 1868. When the mother colony acquired the Memrik district, my parents were able to get a place there. Their lot¹ got them 31 *desiatinas* (65 acres)² in Nordheim and so the Peter Neufelds became landowners.

My Neufeld grandparents lived about 14 years in the city of Berdyansk. In 1880 they came to their property in Nordheim³. The family lived together 24 years. They tilled the land and planted a big garden. Grandfather had his smithy, and grandmother worked as a midwife. My grandmother was very handy with women and children, and had a reputation throughout the settlement's villages. [16] Grandfather had a fair bit of work as a smithy besides farming. As the girls grew, one big worry was the arthritis in Anna's right leg. Even with all her knowledge, grandmother had been unable to help her with the pain and degeneration. Anna's leg grew worse until she became lame. She suffered a lot of pain.

Both daughters married. Ida's husband was Russian and they went together to Canada where their parents visited them. That was sensational at the time. Grandmother had for many years talked of her experiences and impressions from Canada. It was always interesting for us when she talked about the new world. Aunt Ida probably didn't live long in America. We didn't get much news about them, nor did grandmother and grandfather. There were specific reasons but I'll talk about it at a different place. Aunt Ida's husband supposedly went into the Salvation Army after the death of his wife. Every sign of where he stayed was lost.

Anna also got married, to the tallest young man in the whole area, although she was one of the tiniest girls in the village. Her husband was Johann Peter Toews⁴, an orphan who grew up at his brother Peter's. Johann was a carpenter. These were our parents. With Anna Neufeld, the little lame girl, as his wife, Johann Toews established his own home. Father and grandfather Neufeld worked a few years together. They manufactured wagons that sold very well. Father made the wooden parts; grandfather did all the iron parts.⁵

It was a good business, but did not last long. Grandfather became sick. He worsened and died in 1904. Our grandmother became a widow. She did not want to continue working on her own place, so she moved into our home where there were already seven children. Grandmother Neufeld's house was rented and my parents worked the Neufeld land.

¹ Lots were drawn in the distribution of homesteads when new villages were established.

² The 960 *desiatinas* of Nordheim were divided into 32 half-size farms of 30 *desiatinas* (81 acres or 32.76 hectares).

³ The land for the villages of Memrik colony was purchased in 1885.

⁴ 4 January 1890.

⁵ See James Urry, *None But Saints* (Hyperion, 1989) p.141 on the collaboration of carpenter and smithy (in machinery production, especially wagons) from the 1830s.

After two years, in 1906 grandmother Neufeld married David Dörksen. He came from the Crimea where he was a bishop in the Mennonite Church. Grandpa Dörksen wasn't only a good-looking man, but was a strict and kind overseer in his church, and a good speaker. Before that he had been a teacher. Not only grandmother, but our whole family respected him. I never learned to know him, but when I arrived in this world, I received his name. It had been the wish of our whole family especially grandmother. I can't necessarily say whether this name which grandmother loved was the reason she always especially favoured me, but that is what I felt. Too bad grandmother's happy marriage with grandfather Dörksen didn't last very long. He died in 1910 of an unknown disease. He suffered only a short while before he died. Then grandmother returned to live with us.

At this time my parents already had a big house with many rooms and grandmother moved into the best one—the parlour. It was big and occupied the whole street side with large windows where she continued her hobby of tending flowers. Not only were the windows of this room filled with flowers, but all the windows of our big house, right out to the porch. It was a joy to look at. Many persons walking by would admire them from the street. And how they grew! [17] Grandmother always ate with us at our table and always looked after herself. She used her own dishes that she always washed and stacked in the parlour. Using her own wash set, she used cold water to wash. It had to be rainwater. In winter she would always melt snow in her own metal pitcher. What we children always liked was the fragrant laundry soap grandmother used.

Yes, grandmother was a very particular lady—everything had to be perfect. In that, she became an example for us to follow. We learned much from her about independence. Neither mother nor anyone else had to look after her. This was quite all right for the family since we had a lot of other things to do. Grandmother was never dissatisfied, and she helped where she could. She constantly knitted for the whole family, and every evening I sat at her little table, and looked at her pictures while she told me all about them because I couldn't read yet. She also taught me poems and songs. We sang them together until I knew them from memory and could sing them by myself. And then she encouraged me to sing them during my playtime. This became such a habit that I did it all my life. Later it struck many of our neighbours that I would sing in the garden, on the fields, in the workshop—always singing. One verse I learned from her in my early childhood went like this:

Singing makes our life lovely, makes the heart happy;
God has given us singing to soften our pain.
So, let's sing like the birds of the air
And give Him the glory, who lives in heaven.

Later I learned other verses of this song. I enjoyed the time with grandmother at her little table and on the oven bench. I loved Grandmother; we loved each other.¹

She did not remain a widow for long the second time. A certain Johann Martens, a

¹ David's brother Hans said the older children saw grandmother as somewhat demanding, and an imposition on their lame mother.

farmer from the village of Orloff, Sagradovka Colony, Kherson Province, asked for her hand. He wooed her and she agreed to enter her third marriage. It probably was about 1912-1914. I can remember how unhappy I was that the new *opah* took grandmother away. When she wasn't there anymore her big room seemed so empty. Gone was her nice chest from which I got many special treats, and her nice settee with the soft down cushions where we would sit. I was sure there wasn't another settee like that one! Going into her room in the evenings brought no joy. It seemed dead.

I don't know how long after this farewell that my grandmother and grandfather Martens' daughter visited us. She was unknown to us and we were told we should call her aunt Sara. [18] When I realized that she had come from grandmother, I loved her on the spot. After all, she carried the same surname. Aunt Sara was not very young and I remember that we understood each other very well—we clicked right away. But she soon was gone too.

After grandmother had moved out of the big room, it was turned back into our parlour, especially for Bible study gatherings as was the practice among the Mennonite Brethren¹.

But this marriage of grandmother's didn't last long either. After 4 or 5 years it ended in catastrophe. In 1914 WWI began and in October, 1917, the Revolution broke out. This revolution destroyed many of our people, not only the farms and homes. Anarchist gangs roamed the country killing, stealing and destroying². Riding or driving horses through the villages, they thieved and murdered. One of these bandit gangs suddenly came into grandmother and grandfather's village, and murdered 60 people in one night. The women were raped. Houses and barns were burned. Valuables were stolen. Everything was ransacked and left covered with blood and corpses. The best horses were taken from the barns. The wagons were loaded with goods and taken away.

They came into our grandparent's house. Sara was able to hide in the garden under some bushes, an extremely difficult thing because the light from all the burning hay and straw stacks made the gardens bright and everything could be seen so easily. The bandits shot off both of grandfather's hands. They forced grandmother to take the lamp and lead them through the house so that they could find anything they wanted. She could not tend to grandfather's wounds and he bled to death. After the bandits left, grandfather lay dead on the floor.

During the days and weeks that followed, the living remnant struggled to bring some order back to their demolished village and half-empty houses. They buried the mutilated

¹ The Mennonite Brethren met in homes during this time. This differentiated them from the other Mennonite church.

² Makhno terrorized Sagradovka in late from 29 November to 1 December, 1919, using Shesternia as a base and attacking in Gnadenfeld, Reinfeld, Orloff, Tiege, Muensterberg and Schönau. 199 people were murdered. For a full account of the Sagradovka massacre and a list of those killed and missing see Gerhard Lohrenz, *Fire Over Sagradovka* (Gerhard Lohrenz: Steinbach MB: 1983).

corpses, giving them over to mother earth. That became Bartholomew's Night¹ to the people of Orloff. Nearby villagers came to help their neighbours in Orloff. Then kind nature blanketed the sorrowful earth with a shroud of heavy snow.

Slowly grief and fear subsided. By spring much of the destruction had been repaired. But it was difficult to work through the inner devastation, and the loss of mutilated families. The pain lasted for years. Many had died without resolution. But life on God's sinful earth went on.

In the spring of 1920, the Red Army of the Soviet Revolution had broken the various counter-revolutionaries. There was relative order in the land to the point where we were able to travel. Mostly you walked; sometimes you went with horse and wagon. Even train travel was possible again.

Our big problem was how to get grandmother back to us. [19] My brother Hans took a two-horse wagon to Orloff to get grandmother. It was nearly 200 kilometres one way, a distance we had never attempted.² The great difficulty would be the horses having to get used to the various kinds of water, and perhaps becoming sick on the trip. And so, it happened. On the way, Hans' best horse got sick, and he had to leave it with a farmer who loaned him a replacement.

In about two weeks, brother Hans came onto our yard with grandmother, and her most basic household items. Now grandmother was back as usual in the parlour, her nice settee and chest, and her big bed standing where they stood before. Now I could visit grandmother again every evening. I still did that, although I was twelve years old by this time. But now grandmother wasn't the happy woman she used to be.

She lived with us until 1929 when we tried to immigrate to Canada. From then until 1938 grandmother lived with my sister Liese who was still living in Nordheim. Until her death, grandmother was healthy, and very well preserved. She could have lived longer if she had listened to her doctor, and followed his direction. She suffered a little with her liver because she loved fatty meals, and couldn't say no to heavy foods.

It so happened that at my sister Leise's, every fall they had *Schwins Kjust*— traditional pig slaughter. Grandmother did what she was used to doing: she went to the cauldron where the lard was being rendered, and not being able to resist temptation, drew out and ate one deep fried rib after another. Mother and sister Leise had forgotten to watch grandmother and prevent this. All the work had preoccupied them so that they couldn't keep an eye on grandmother. When she became sick during the night, they called the doctor, but it was too late. She passed away that night at age 94.

Grandmother was very well preserved until her last breath. Her mind was clear. She

¹ On St. Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572 and the next week, nearly 100,000 Protestants were massacred in France.

² The Zagradovka Colony was on the Ingulez River ca. 100 km slightly northeast of the city of Kherson. It was nearly 400 km west of Nordheim.

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always sang and knitted. On a fat-free diet she could have lived much longer. But the evil one was always waiting to see how he could beguile her, and offer her the forbidden fruit. She took it, and she had to die. She became a sacrifice like thousands of others. Now it was my dear grandmother's turn, may she rest in peace. At this time, I was already a teacher for a few years in Stalino. I came home for grandmother's funeral. That fall I visited her grave, and made a frame around it. That was the least I could do for my loving grandmother.

PART I - CHAPTER 6

OUR PARENTS

[20] As I said before, my father's parents were never wealthy. They were forced through circumstances to be landless. They had to give up farming and consider some type of skilled labour, although both grandfather and grandmother had no education along this line. Being extremely poor, and barely able to look after themselves, they had not been able to give Johann any education as a farmer or skilled labourer.

Their oldest son, Peter, decided to follow his inclinations, and became a noted wood worker at that time. His younger brother (our father) wanted to be just like his big brother.¹

And so, father, after two years of village schooling, was sent to a carpenter to study the trade. He occasionally spoke of these years. His master had a few apprentices, and give them each work appropriate to their abilities. He had never been overly dissatisfied, and was easy to get along with.

"I saw that I was stronger than the others and so I gladly took over the heavier and more

¹ *Written in the margin:* This younger brother, Johann, later came to live with Peter because his parents had died before they were able to provide for their youngest offspring's future. When and where father's parents died, I have never heard. Nor do I know how long grandmother was a widow. That is obscure. My father never talked much about his growing up, how he developed physically, spiritually, or morally and established his own home. My mother would occasionally mention that father had developed very positively in spite of his patron (his older brother), and his siblings. In contrast to his brother, father was tall (over six feet), physically strong, with a lot of energy and drive to accomplish much. Early on he had an interest in innovation. And from his childhood, he wanted, and took enormous responsibility for encouraging others (and himself). He always had to be there for his physically weaker older brother and sisters. So, he was never selfish, thinking first about others, then himself. From early childhood without father or mother, he had to learn to live as a tolerated orphan (perhaps not always the hardest form of orphan). The loving care of a mother, normal in Mennonite families, had totally passed him by.

complicated jobs. I realized soon that I gained more by doing this even though I did notice that I was taken advantage of materially. But then I only had myself to take care of,” said my father. “And as much as possible I wanted a diverse education. At night, we slept in a room barely heated. Another guy and I had one blanket over us both, and when we woke up it was either frozen hard, or there was snow on the whole thing. We were not spoiled with special food. Baked goods with white flour were only Sunday fare. But we never went hungry. Our very little pocket money didn’t go far. We used tobacco only sparingly, and alcohol, never—neither us, nor our master. [21] But we had many opportunities to learn fairness, justice, high ideals and honesty. We were discouraged from lying and cheating. One of the apprentices was a Russian. We came out of the same background, both being orphans, but we were also different. I was physically stronger and could help him, but he was very gifted in the finer work because he had been studying longer. He gave me many tips. There was another difference. From early childhood I was raised to not be expecting things, and to be satisfied with little—without complaining—because I was the youngest. My friend was older, and had more experience. He was quick to anger, resisted unfairness, and freely gave his opinions. He would obey with great resistance. But he worked hard, being honest and trustworthy. When he was unjustly treated, he would always say he wasn’t going to stay very long, and was going to look for his father who had left him and his mother. (His mother had since died.) And he would find him and forgive him. I often thought to myself that I had never gotten to know my father, but that I didn’t need to look for him. I didn’t know any differently from my siblings than that my father had died.”

Johann had had to say goodbye to this Russian friend and never met him again. My father had learned the Russian language from his friend. And compared to most Mennonites, my father spoke Russian very well to great advantage. He had had a good apprenticeship with his master. He was much better than his older brother who was also a carpenter.

During this time, his brother Peter married, and drew a land lot in a new district [Memrik]. He took his younger brother with him, who, as an orphan, was considered part of the family. Johann had turned 17 by this time, and had grown into a strong realist. He loved life, was sure of himself, and very ambitious. Father was quite aware of how much he could help his brother at the new village, and was very good, and managed to live well with his brother and his wife. A new settlement was always a challenge for settlers to get established.

In the village of Nordheim, people had a special difficulty to overcome.¹ Among all the settlements in Memrik, Nordheim had an unforeseen problem. The village was on a plateau without a valley. [22] This had been obvious from the beginning but wasn’t reckoned to be a problem, especially since steppe land is good for farming. The mother colony would dig the first well, about two metres in diameter with a horse driven pump to supply the whole village. In the meantime, people would have to go 4-5 kilometres to the Russian village of Seladovka once a month because they did have water. Those were the plans.

Reality was different. At first all the water was carried from the neighbouring village

¹ *Written in the margin:* The water supply is the single most important thing.

as expected. On the first day, they began to dig the planned well at the centre of the village. Father was certainly involved in the first digging. They dug night and day, shoring up with heavy timbers as they went down. So, they dug 5, 8, 10, 12 metres, but no water appeared. They dug 15, 20, 25 metres—no water. The men got very tired. Miners were hired. At 28 metres the sand began to get wet. Perhaps soon water would be reached.

It was now autumn. Now they had to dig out the sand and had enough water at 28-30 metres deep. But always there was more and more sand—quick sand! As soon as it was removed, more flowed back in. A wooden liner was lowered in to support the surrounding sand, but it was impossible. It couldn't be pushed down because it stuck to the sides and ultimately had to be taken out in pieces. They broke it up and took it out one wall at a time. Then they dug out the sand and the water settled in. The first side of the form worked well; the second one too. For weeks they had worked day and night with this problem. Now the third side was knocked out. A noise signaled that the timbers were straining and turning. People were very anxious and father of course was there. Then they all cried "Get us out! We are being crushed!" Four of the strongest men were down there. They were saved but the form under them was twisted like a rope according to father. From a flat platform higher up, they could see the forms splintered and twisted, a mess of wood and sand.

Always and quietly the quick sand came in, and started to fill up the well. It wasn't long until it filled the whole excavation. The work had been in vain. The forces of nature were bigger than them. They had lost the battle. This time nature did not give water, and winter was at the door.

Now getting water for the village was a real problem. Father and Peter Neufeld, the blacksmith, built a special water wagon. [23] Day after day, all winter long, they went for water from the neighbouring village. Of course, much snow was melted too. In every house (just sod huts) they melted snow. It gave more than enough, and because of the nature of the steppe land, there were many snow drifts. They organized a special group to go every morning from house to house to dig snow from the doors and chimneys. So that was their first winter with many difficulties.

A new group worked at a new well. This was built under the direction of specialists in order to be ready by spring. Father was also very involved. Spring came. The well should have been finished, but again the plans were overturned. The second well was destroyed by the same catastrophe as the first. The hope for that kind of well had to be abandoned. There now was only one way. They built little wells 70-80 cm. in diameter. This was possible and a few neighbours got together to build each. And so, the water problem was solved. For two years, though, most of the settlers had to get their water from the neighbouring Russian village.

After the well problems, the Nordheimers discovered that the joy of having open land had more than one side to it. Where there are no lowlands there is no clay for making brick. No bricks, no houses! Materials would have to be purchased where available. In fact,

in the whole Memrik district, every village had the same problem.¹

Settlement had been very difficult. Many left for better opportunities, but leaving cost money—much money—and our parents had none. They had to stay and see how they could handle the situation. The one who persists wins, and our parents were winners! For ten years father worked hard to help his brother Peter build up a home to live in and raise his family. A house was built with a barn and shed all under one roof. A well was dug with excellent water. (Not every well had equally good water.) The fields were worked, and harvested, and implements had been bought. The first children had arrived to uncle Peter.

[24] It seemed time for father to start his own home. He had a good job, was healthy, strong and experienced. What he appreciated most was that the villagers liked and trusted him. He had earned it. It hadn't occurred to him that he would get a wife from another village.

In those days the custom was that households with eligible daughters would paint their doors green. A suitor would knock and ask for a drink. While the men talked, the eligible girl would serve them.

Father already had noticed a lovely girl in a good family with high standards. That was Ida Neufeld. Yes, Ida had appealed to both his eye and his heart. That's where he wanted to look for happiness. But would he find it?

In looking for a wife, Johann showed his own peculiarity. Being among the young people, Johann had learned to identify both the Neufeld daughters. He had known both of them to see them, but work had preoccupied him, always lots to do. Brother Peter was not strong, and Johann had taken it as his mission to help him with all his strength. But there also had to be times of rest during which he would visit the house where his hopes lay. And his eyes were definitely considering Ida. She realized this quickly and she approved.

Johann had noticed that as soon as he entered the house, Anna would leave for the kitchen to read or sew. Yes, Anna was not as obviously present as Ida was—Anna being smaller, having a lame leg, and of course younger. Now Johann had also noticed that Ida never had anything to do when he was there, but Anna was always busy! He also noticed that Ida was very self-important, and looked down on Anna. Johann took note.

When Johann went as usual to see his girlfriend, he came a bit late, and Ida was not only impatient but she was also taking it out on Anna. She led Johann by the arm into the room, and plunked down on his lap when he sat down (not an unusual thing for two courting persons). Then Johann had asked quite suddenly for Ida to get him some water. And instead of getting up, Ida yelled into the kitchen in a very demanding tone, "Anna! Bring Johann some water." Anna brought in the water for Johann, and left. Ida didn't even thank her sister.

¹ Although the agreement for the Memrik colony stipulated building with fired clay bricks, the houses in Nordheim, and some other villages, were built of air-dried bricks by necessity.

That was enough for Johann. He abruptly shoved Ida off his lap, took a drink and went into the kitchen. He politely thanked Anna for the water. He only glanced at Ida, and without saying good-bye, he left. [25] His relationship with Ida now had obviously been breached.

In a few days, Johann's mind was made up. As usual he walked into the house where he was looking for his prospective wife, but this time it wasn't Ida, but Anna who he looked for. He would ask Anna for the hand that had given him the water. When Johann entered the house, he met Anna in the kitchen working. He sat down with her at the table, and when he heard that her parents were not home, he asked Anna directly if she would marry him. "I would like you to be my wife for life." When Ida, in great impatience had stepped to the door, and heard what was going on in the kitchen, she got hold of a knife, and with all of her great anger, walked through the door, and went after Johann! This was too much. With his Olympian strength, he took Ida, put her over his knee, and with his hand, he gave her a good spanking, in the way we often spank boys. Then they all sat down, and without a word, waited for the parents to come home.

After a short explanation of what had happened, Anna's parents asked Johann whether he had really thought about what he would do with a little sick girl. Where upon my father said, "I have chosen a wife who would give me water without discussion. And suddenly, I have strength for two." That was the end of father's courtship.

Later Ida decided to get married to their Russian servant out of the neighbouring village. We can imagine how all these episodes of the family turned into scandal. We can also understand that the best solution was for aunt Ida and her husband to go to America. Neither mother nor grandmother was willing to talk about this. Aunt Ida was only occasionally mentioned when they would reminisce.

My parent's wedding was on 1 January 1890 on the old calendar¹. The wedding text was Psalm 128:1-4². Those words were all fulfilled. We can see that the preacher must have foreseen what was going to happen.

The first thing they had to think of was where to live—with his brother, or at her parents—but only for a while. Neither was even thinkable because both had small one or two room houses.³ [26] Right after the wedding, a house had to be built on the yard temporarily. They certainly could have found a place on brother Peter's yard. For a decade father had slaved for his brother. But this didn't happen. Mother's parents gave permission

¹ There is a 13-day difference between the old and new calendar dates, so their wedding would be 14 January on our current calendar.

² Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. (Revised Standard Version)

³ The agreement for the Memrik colony stipulated houses were to be 12.8 m by 8.5 m with walls 2.4 m high (42' by 28' by 8'), but were unlikely to be this large to begin with.

Memories of His Hometown

for them to build. It would cost about 100 rubles at that time for the wood, doors, roof and nails. But father didn't have this in his purse. From whom father borrowed this, no one ever found out. Now you would wonder why father in ten years hadn't saved 100 rubles, especially since he was thinking about getting married. Can't you see the signs of how selflessly father had worked for his brother? "What I brought into my marriage," father sometimes used to say, "was the carpenter's bench, and the necessary tools, good strong hands, and an enormous will—and a one-hundred-ruble debt!" In one month they had built the house. Then their work really started.



Anna and Johann Peter Toews ca.1890

Father and grandfather Neufeld built and repaired wagons. Father did the carpentry; grandfather, the blacksmith work. Day and night father stood by his bench.

In the little house they built their own home. In this little house only 4 metres by 8 metres they were happy. Here their first children were born: Anna in 1891; Peter in 1892; Sara in 1894; Maria in 1895; Hans in 1898; Katherina (Tina) in 1900.

What happened then mother told me with tears in her eyes. With six children and Anna, the oldest, only nine years old, my father experienced catastrophe. There were many reasons why father got sick in his lungs, always perspiring from exertion, a wet shirt in an atmosphere of wood smoke, chills, much very physical work with barely adequate food, and smoking. He deteriorated so fast that not only he, but all those who knew him could hardly grasp the truth that such an Olympian-strong man with such emotional strength went down so quickly.

The work at the bench had to be given up. He stopped smoking only because it was a matter of life and death. He couldn't depend on medical help since there was no doctor. And anyway, to go away to a doctor cost money they didn't have. But before father arrived at complete physical and emotional breakdown, "Then, when the need was the greatest –" my mother always said with great emotion, "– then, God's help was the closest."

Father was offered a property in bankruptcy at a very good price. The house was in bad shape, but it was in the middle of the village, next to the school. [27] With a big family this was ideal, the oldest children being ready for school, and the others coming later. The location and price were good, but what father saw as most important was the land that came with the property: an allotment of 35 hectares. That's how Johann Toews changed from carpenter to farmer. The neighbours congratulated and encouraged him, wishing him success and happiness. Mother often repeated what father said after this, "I have tried to build a house with people, and was defeated. Now I want to try it with the Lord. From my carpenter's bench, I'll now go to work with nature. Perhaps I'll find health again."

And father's health did improve. He was always in the fresh air, in the yard, garden and fields. My parents already had a cow. With fresh air and fresh milk, they had been able to stay father's sickness, and he was well. Even to his death he had no more lung disease.

With farming, my parents managed to get on better economically despite many difficulties. They needed stock, inventory, and especially seed. As a farmer, father received more credit than when he was a carpenter. When grandpa Neufeld died later on, grandmother didn't want to work her land, and my parents got this land too. The house was torn down, and my folks worked the land.

Now my father was the largest landowner in Nordheim with 62 hectares (132 acres).¹ He also was highly trusted by the village council. Very soon he became the village administrator. A few years excepted, my father was headman for over 20 years. He was a strict, responsible, dependable and trustworthy administrator. Along with other wealthy farmers, he was responsible for the economic wellbeing of widows, and the trusteeship of orphans. He was also a school trustee. Because of his humility and trustworthiness, villagers confided in him, and he respected that. He appreciated it, and never misused their trust.

Later father bought another half acreage, 15 hectares, from a widow who had re-settled.

¹ Two full farms of 60 *desiatinas*.

(She later moved to Siberia.¹) He was responsible for the rental of the other half of her land and sent the profit to her in Siberia.

Even with all this economic growth, my parents suffered a number of difficulties. And then they had to call up all their resources to overcome these adversities. This time the problem was my mother's. As I've already written, she had a bad right leg since childhood that caused her problems walking. Now she fell on this lame leg and broke her knee. It had happened on a lovely sunny Saturday evening. [28] Father and mother had decided to go to church in another village, about 4-5 kilometres away². My parents didn't always go to church every Sunday because there were so many children and the horses needed rest too. In her great happiness, looking forward to the next day, mother forgot to watch her next step, as was her constant habit. She had dropped a potato peel, failed to see it, slipped, lost her balance, fell, and broke her right knee. Instead of going to church, mother had to go to bed, not only for that Sunday, but for many weeks.

She had a lot of pain. Good medical help was not a consideration. What grandmother Neufeld could do she did, but she was unable to help the pain. Grandmother couldn't stay in our home all the time. Father was forced to help with much of the housework, even though the oldest daughter, Anna, had already learned to do a fair bit. After a number of very difficult weeks, my mother was able to walk to the table by pushing a chair.

This accident of mother's broken leg wasn't nearly recuperated (would it ever be totally healed?) when another calamity hit. All five children got measles at once. Now father had to spend even more time looking after his family, and this made father very anxious. Not that he didn't want to look after wife and children, he did it gladly, and wouldn't let them suffer unduly. He was always remembering his own childhood. He had sworn to himself that his own children should never suffer, or feel lack of caring in their early years. But it was getting to be spring. The warm sun thawed the snow more intensely. It seemed that an early spring was on its way, and they would be able to get on the land. And there was much to be done on the yard. Many, many things had to be done before seeding could start.

Mother not only understood father's worries, but shared them. But what could she do? With the greatest of effort, she would go hobbling from bed to bed giving the children a drink of water. No, it was still too difficult. And father saw that he had to continue looking after the family. Then father got the measles too! He had never had them as a child, and because people were convinced back then that if adults got measles, it was very dangerous, father had to be confined to bed. So, father went to bed with the children, all deep under the blankets. And it was so unnecessary.

¹ The common idea of Siberia being a punishment is not always correct. The area east of the Urals that was commonly called Siberia held much opportunity for new agriculture and industry especially in the southern areas. Mennonite colonies were established in the Siberian south-west in the late 1800s. During the Soviet period, Siberia became a watchword for exile and suffering for those sent to the forced-labour camps of the Gulag in the northern territories across all of Russia.

² The nearest Mennonite Brethren church was in Kotlyarevka about 8 km away after 1887.

Grandmother was unable to come and help her daughter regularly, for her house was quite a distance from my parent's. Mother was faced with six patients, with one child on the way, and her tears from the pain. She often hopped on one leg from bed to bed, from the water pail to the stove, to the bed again, to look after her family. [29] Naturally grandmother would have been there to help whenever she could. And by times, a neighbour lady would come over to help, and would also occasionally bring a meal.

It's not hard to visualize how mother was over extended. The result was that her broken bone was never set, nor cast. It healed crooked. She hadn't been able to give it the required care.

Slowly the children recovered. Father took longer. Mother's leg pain had diminished. Her walking got a bit better, but her leg was totally crippled. When father did get better, the first thing he did was make mother a crutch. She had to use it from then on. She couldn't go a step without it and it helped her navigate so she could save her leg. Now it would straighten.¹ From my sister Tina down the line, we have never seen mother walk without a crutch. Of course, it was a struggle in itself for mother to even walk with the crutch, not just walking, but also accepting. This had a real impact on father and mother in both ways. With the crutch she could only use her left hand.

Sometimes mother would encourage us children by saying that if we hadn't been sick, she wouldn't even be able to walk. Father would be quiet when she would say this. When one of us children would say that if we could have treated that sick leg properly, it wouldn't have been stiff, but it still would have been easier for her than having a crippled leg, then father would often repeat this Ukrainian saying: "If I would have known where I would have fallen, then I would have put straw there."

As I have written, father got measles just when the winter started fighting the onset of spring. The way it often happens, sometimes winter wins and sometimes spring. Although spring had begun sooner before father got sick causing father to worry that his neighbours would be getting on the fields while he was still in bed, it worked out very differently. The too-early spring disappeared, and it got colder, and we had another short winter. When spring finally did come the winter was totally defeated, and my father was getting better. [30] Now they could look favourably on each other—my father on the sun, and the sun on my father. Spring seeding started. The sky brightened for our parents. But many years of important events were yet to come.

My sister Tina was born and my parents started to build a new house. It was to become the biggest house in the village: 16 m long and 9 m wide, with its length along the street unlike other houses in Nordheim. It would have many rooms with windows and doors.

With great energy father threw himself into his new work, and the building progressed well. More children were added to the family. Tina was born in 1900². In 1902 sister Liese was born and died in infancy. Then in 1904, Gerhard arrived. This year grandfather Neufeld

¹ *Written in the margin:* This was the erroneous belief.

² Actually 20 December 1899.

also passed away. He had been sick for a number of years. Grandmother had become a widow, and came to live with us in the new house.

As already mentioned, 31 hectares more land came to us meaning a fair bit more work and income. So, father built another barn of fired bricks, 15 metres by 9 metres, the shed, 16 m by 12 m and machinery was purchased. Then more children were added again! Another daughter came to my parents in 1905, a second Liese.

In 1906 my grandmother married, and went with grandfather Dörksen to the Crimea. In 1908 a little son entered into this world named David after grandfather David Dörksen. This little fellow would never get to know his parents or siblings. Father had been very happy at the birth of this son, but the new baby died very soon. Father grieved very much. Father provided a resting place for him in a quiet corner of our garden and planted a rose bush on his little grave. A little way from here, my parents had planted a few May cherries.

Father's pain regarding David was turned into joy again for in 1909 another son was born into the family, and they called him David also after grandfather Dörksen. And I am the one writing these memoirs. After me, I got a little sister, Elvira¹ in 1912: They had birthed 12 children, but only 10 lived to be raised by our wonderful parents.

My father was the tallest man in the area (2 m) and my mother the smallest (1.45 m). As already mentioned, father had acquired another 15 hectares from the widow Isaak, and was satisfied with the purchase of 75 hectares. He now had 78 hectares to cultivate and that should be sufficient. And they also hoped it was the end of having children.

Now in 1915, grandmother married the third time. We received a new grandfather, a farmer from the Mennonite Sagradovka colony. Because grandmother had moved out of the parlour it was changed back to use for visitors and Bible studies. [31] At this time, our parents had been able to improve their finances, not rich, but very well off. Also, their social position was very stable. In the village, father, as the village administrator, was mostly looked up to. It was a lot of work. He knew the Russian language very well, and managed to communicate well with government officials.

Spiritually, our parents stood very solid. Long ago, they had both joined the Mennonite Brethren. In the church, father was the secretary-treasurer. He was also active in other ways. The bishop of our church, a Jakob Doerksen², also lived in our village, kitty-corner from us. Father had his office in our house, and many church decisions were discussed at our place.

In spite of mother's physical condition, she was active in the church community. From her mother she had learned homeopathy, and cared for children. It was routine for many people to come to her with health problems for her advice or help. She could often help. If anyone in the village, young or old, died, nobody thought anything about going to the little

¹ She was known as Ella.

² Jakob Doerksen was a Mennonite Brethren church deacon when the colony was founded.

Mrs. Toews, and asking her to prepare the body for burial. Mother had always been able to do these duties. The way my grandmother always had her mid-wife's satchel ready, so my mother kept her funeral satchel ready. One brought them into the world; the other brought them out. Father had always kept enough wood to make a coffin since his carpentry days. Four boards were always kept and never used just in case there was a sudden death and a coffin was needed. He suggested all his neighbours do the same.

In our parents' house there were very definite rules. Father's office was off-limits to us children under any circumstances, and most definitely if a visitor was present. If a visitor arrived with a problem and came to father, mother or grandmother, we younger children were not allowed to be there, not even the older children. A certain look was enough to send us out where we belonged, the yard, grandmother's room, or the children's room (where we all had our corners for particular treasures). After our parents, the oldest sibling had the right to tell us what to do, and we had to obey. Our parents expected the older ones to be kind and gentle with their younger ones. There was a very special relationship between us young ones and our older siblings. I received both good care and a great measure of love from all.

[32] Our whole upbringing—the order in our house, and our nurturing—was solidly built on a religious foundation. Every day began with morning worship. My father would read a spiritual reading, and pray aloud. During prayer, we all had to stand. During Christian holidays, or when there was company, we would often sing a song suggested by father. Even now I hear father's voice:

- v 1. Due to God we and our kin awoke...
- v 2. In happy faith I'll follow God's ways...
- v 3. Into your hand I commit this day
 And ask for your aid;
 Even if you send us troubled times
 I'll accept without complaint.

Each meal would begin with a prayer of thanks for the food, without exception or excuse, whether home at the table, or in the fields, by the granary, in church, or at a table filled with guests. It didn't matter how many visitors, or how busy we were at threshing, there was always time for giving thanks. When new servants came into our house, father explained our custom at table. But he never forgot to tell them, especially the Orthodox Russians, that they should not be afraid if they had a different form, but instead, to use it. We had to respect each other's faith. Father explained that if we thank and pray, the form isn't as important as the inner response to God. The form was not as important to God as to people.

We didn't go the four to five kilometres to church every Sunday because the horses needed rest too. Bible studies were held every Sunday evening in the village where they always attended. We children learned to sit still and listen.

Memories of His Homeland

How we did at school was always monitored by our parents because they kept in good communication with the teacher, and we had only to go through the garden to get to the school.

During evenings, when we did homework, parents took time for us. Especially important was the twilight before the darkness. We loved twilight, just before it was too dark to see. It wasn't always the same length. When not bright enough to work or read, we didn't light the lamps (we only had kerosene then). We would sit as a rule with our parents on the oven bench and talk together. We younger children could sit on father's lap, or between father and mother. These hours often disclosed the most interesting things. Father would talk about his travels. He traveled much in the Caucasus. He would talk about his youth, and of how they settled. Or he would talk about the markets and fairs that he had visited. We children also could talk, and ask mother and father about many things. Sometimes we would sing or recite poetry. Yes, in this time our parents were totally with us, and for us.

[33] These hours of twilight became some of our most wonderful times of the day especially in winter when things become very boring. Afterward, we had to go to our various duties. My father would put on the 12-burner kerosene lamp and we would sit around our big dining room table (2.5 m by 1.2 m). Here we did homework. We learned to read and memorize poems, speaking with muffled tones, just loud enough for our parents to understand us. They listened and helped, correcting our wrong thinking. One instance is unforgettable. In my reader were the words 'acacia path.' Had the words 'acacia arbour' been written it would have been easy for me to get this word correctly and properly articulated. I knew about acacia hedges. We had one on our yard. Now when I read this unknown word, I garbled it and something else came out. Finally, mother asked, "Boy, what is it that you are trying to read? You are pronouncing that word so oddly. Don't you know what a path is?" I replied that I didn't know. Then my mother explained, and everything was clear. Now I was excited because I could help some of the other children to read it at school. I was very proud of this since the teacher would praise me.

Our parents each only had two years of schooling. But for many years they had listened to their older children (Anna, Sara, Hans and Gerhard) when they worked at their studies, and they had listened carefully, and learned much. They had been unhappy and discouraged when they encountered people who were obviously well educated. But by being interested, and listening carefully during reading, they had learned much. This had not only profited them, but also profited us younger ones who were learning from our older siblings. Yes, my parents were very interested in good education, and worked hard so we could learn, and do our best.

They especially appreciated good penmanship. Christmas and New Year wishes were taught in school, and we had to recite them at home. These were later copied into special booklets in the best penmanship, and given to parents. During my school years, it had become traditional that we would get a thick scribbler for copying Christmas and New Year poems and songs. This had to be done accurately, and with the best writing possible. Father and mother would look here and there in these scribblers. One could re-write for improvement, but we always tried to do our best the first time. We were also encouraged

to decorate and embellish each page with artwork. When we were older, we would spend time reciting poetry and prose. Father and mother would occasionally insert a Bible verse, or song stanza, or just a sentence, but this was done in a very leisurely and spontaneous way. These memories would have to be re-written, or re-organized so that many of these songs, verses, poems, and etc., were stored in our minds. Who couldn't appreciate all these learned by heart?

And in our home, we would sing, and play the ever present musical instruments: guitar, mandolin, violin, zither, and reed organ with its foot bellows. We all played at least one or two instruments, and generally sang in harmony. The songs were varied: nursery rhymes, children's ditties, youth's love songs, songs of nature, war and farewell laments, but also many religious songs in German and Russian. But mostly we would sing *Heimat lieder*¹. There wasn't any organized program either from school, church, or any other organization where songs, poems or poetic presentations were not delivered. One of us children was always involved. We also sang in the choirs for church or other presentations.

Our parents encouraged us a lot, nurturing the desire to be involved in the various opportunities for positive activities. They saw to it that we could be involved in sewing, knitting, crocheting, embroidery and more, for the girls; and for the boys, woodworking, ironwork, bookbinding, and brush making. Children would go into whatever they liked. This could provide a future opportunity.

We could never visit away from home except on Sundays, and then only if the parents would allow it. To fool around from place to place, or house to house was not allowed. But if there was an organized excursion, or nature walk, we were always encouraged to participate.

We were taught to take responsibility to look after house, yard, and garden. If anything was re-modeled, we had to take part in the work. Everyone did what he could. Stuccoing, painting, whitewashing, fixing, or even fetching water—whatever needed to be done. We were taught to do everything in the house, the yard, with machinery, tools, and etc. Helping was always encouraged. Many flowers were planted along walkways, in the garden, along the street, and inside the house, and we looked after them. Our parents took great pains that their children could go on in their education. Anna attended a school for deaconess nurses. I think it was at Muntau, Molotschna². Sara graduated from a German girl's high school. Hans attended secondary school. Tina first finished nursing school, and later became a dentist. Gerhard finished secondary school, and then teacher's college, and after teacher's university became a high school teacher. About the other children I'll talk later.

Father liked to travel and was often asked to look after various responsibilities. When he came home, we would inundate him with questions because he had such varied experiences. In that way he kindled in us an interest in travel. And we enjoyed traveling

¹ Songs extolling ethnicity, home, and country.

² The Muntau hospital had established a small associated school of nursing with residence, *Morija*, in 1896. In May 1909 it began a much-expanded program in nearby Halbstadt.

Memories of His Hometown

much more than many of our acquaintances.

After a time, our parents had attained their farming goals. They had the largest acreage in the village, the biggest house, the biggest barn, and the biggest out buildings—the way my father would say it, the biggest, nicest, and best property, the biggest family not only in this village, but also in a large area. By being in the village council, father had gained the respect of the government officials, and his influence was courted. The whole council respected him. But in our family, he remained a loving, and our very loved, father.



Johann Peter Toews' farmstead, Nordheim, Russia, ca. 1920

Now he should have been satisfied. It had taken my parents twenty-two years to acquire all this. Married in 1890 with only 100 rubles, now it was 1912. The oldest child, Anna, was 21 or 22 years old. [35] The youngest daughter was Elvira, 1 or 2 years old. All the children, 6 daughters and 4 sons were in the family home.¹ Anna and Sara were studying away. Nobody in the village had achieved anything like this.

Father was 48 years old and in the best years of life—physically strong, morally stable, and strong in his soul. If he had only been able to stay emotionally healthy, had he been able to keep that under control, he would have been able to control desire. If he had been concerned to build up the emotional and spiritual strength of the home, there would have been a relaxed coziness, especially for mother. Also, there could have been more emphasis

¹ *Written in the margin:* One daughter Lisa, and one son David died in infancy.

on education for the children, practical or otherwise. He could have achieved more inner calm himself, a great asset for his village responsibilities. There also would have been time to encourage the Mennonites in the Word of God and theology, not only according to the letter of the law, but also the spirit. And to be in right relationship to the Russians around them, treating their community with the same generosity that the Russian government had shown in allowing us to establish our homes here. Much of this could have been positive, progressive change in the brotherhood, and in the village.

But father became dogmatic and it came through in every aspect of his relationships. He did what he wanted. Later he saw his mistake and was bitterly repentant, when it was too late to do better. As a result, his last years he talked about with many tears and always blaming himself, accepting the inevitable results. But not back at the time of the big “if.”

The Mill

Then came the crisis of the steam-powered flourmill, and he wasn't as sure of himself. All he was dreaming about was buying a steam mill. Just dreaming was not in my father's nature. He soon found a mill and bought it. Father had a dream and he realized it. [36] But his eyes were blind and unable to see this mill dream as an influence for evil rather than good. That blindness was the oath of the Evil One, continually creating evil from evil, and when evil happens, ruin is not far off. But father wasn't self-critical. He was always right. After the catastrophe had fallen on us all, he realized his mistake. He, his family, and his friends all suffered. Everyone knew of father's great repentance, but many, many years were spent paying for it. And for many years, we also suffered financially.

Father wasn't able to weigh out the issue of the mill even after discussions with his wife and oldest children—no argument helped; he was blind. He couldn't see his wife's arguments for, or against. His own reasoning went like this. His oldest son, Peter, was 20 and no amount of encouragement could get him to go to school—Peter didn't want to study. Then father tried to teach him a decent trade, but to no avail. Peter was without interest, or appetite. Mother and father couldn't figure out why he had no desire to farm, or what he really wanted to do. But one day Peter said, “I would like to manage a mill. That's what I would really like!” At last the problem was solved, and the mill was bought. Now, would Peter finally be able to find his niche? When his dream was shattered, it was too much for my father. We'll see later that it was then that my father's moral freedom was destroyed. His large wounds did heal, but the scares remained. Because his wings were broken, he would never again rise so high.

During 1911/12, not too far away from our village, in the district of Bachmut in Borissovo,¹ a newly developing area, a mill was for sale. Father busied himself

¹ This is probably the new colony of Borissovo founded in 1892 by the Chortitza Colony. It consisted of two villages: Nikolaifeld (Nikolaipol) and Kondratyevka. It was about 40 km north northeast of Nordheim and by 1915 had 80 families with a total population of 400.

encouraging men become his employees. He found them in the children of the church elder, Jakob Doerksen Sr. His son, Jakob Doerksen Jr., was a miller, and his son-in-law, Peter Friesen, was a bookkeeper. The mechanic at the mill wanted to stay on, so he did. My father himself would be the business manager.

When father went to the bank for credit, he realized that he alone of the three investors had credit to put against the mill. The other two had insufficient assets. The entire risk was put on father's account. Father didn't see this as a great risk because the other two had promised, and he trusted their word completely. They from a good family and he never doubted their trustworthiness. The truth was exactly the opposite! Not only that, but in the mill deal, the sellers covered up the fact that they had insufficient water for the operation! [37] This caused a lot of difficulties. Now there were more expenses than anticipated. Also, Peter Friesen, the bookkeeper, was embezzling money from the operating funds to fill his own pockets. Nothing seemed to be accumulating but greater debt.

Before father, as manager, could correct things, the mill burned down! Nobody ever found out who or what caused the fire. Not even a legal suit could occur because it was forbidden by Mennonite doctrine. A telegram came informing father that the mill was burning. No one seemed to have been there, and no one could take care of the immediate legalities. When father arrived, there were only burnt remains. Friesen and the mechanic had disappeared and couldn't be found. Jakob Doerksen Jr. also saw to it that he got out of the mess. The bank didn't say anything to Jakob Doerksen, and his conscience didn't tell him anything, so he left. Only now, when it was too late, did my father realize that his trust was completely misplaced. Peter Friesen went to America, and in a few years, Jakob Doerksen followed to Canada. At this time, it seemed, when anything difficult happened, over the water they went. They were gone with quiet consciences. Doerksen Sr. couldn't do anything but pray—while my father had to pay! Every last dollar was paid to the bank up to 1914.

I remember going to the mill to visit brother Peter and sister Maria. They lived in a neat little house. Peter Friesen and Jakob Doerksen Jr. lived in a bigger house. There I learned to know the Doerksen children, Tina, Nettie and Jake. The boy was my age and the girls a bit older. Friesens had no children. After the fire, brother Peter and sister Maria came back on our yard with a wagon load of their things to be stored in a barn shed. Father stayed to try to sell the houses and property. The only thing I learned at that time was that we didn't have a mill any more. But then one day, me in their best clothes with big books under their arms came to our house. They went through the whole house with Father, barns and sheds, and listed everything for sale. But there never was an auction. How my father got out of that pile of debt, I have never been able to learn. I was only four years old then, but later I never wished to make things more difficult for my father by asking questions. If I did try, father would only become unhappy, and change the subject.

[38] Now it became very difficult. How devastating the whole situation was for father, and the whole family, especially financially. From the first, my father had accepted the fault of being pulled into this devastation. The deep results, however, were not fulfilled yet. We were just beginning to find out. A moral catastrophe would also fall on us.

Changes and War

Firstly, brother Johann was unable to go on to finish high school. At the beginning of 1913, sister Anna got married. The wedding was in one of our barns in good Mennonite custom, and after the wedding, she went with her new husband, Johann Ediger, to Molotschna where he lived.

Then in 1914, a tragedy worse than the mill fire, arrived in our family. We younger children did not understand the ramifications at the time. Later things were told to us little by little. The stork arrived at our house. It brought little brother Nikolai (Kolia). I was five and had noticed a few things already. I knew little children didn't eat bread and butter like us, but needed to be nursed by their mothers. I could remember when Elvira was little that she cried, and my mother would nurse her. If Elvira continued to cry louder, she would be given a smack on the bottom. Now my mother, who hadn't even been sick, didn't nurse either of them. Kolia was bottle-fed. Later he ate cream of wheat. I questioned why things were so different with Kolia, but my questions went unanswered. They didn't even appear to listen to them. "It's none of your business," or "Don't ask so many questions," were the only responses.

Then one day we had a visitor, not too large, a little stout and very bald. I'd never seen him before. He was very friendly to the younger two of us and we learned to call him Uncle Eck. He was a doctor from far away Turkistan! Now my sister Sara came home too. She had been studying somewhere. When uncle Eck left, he took both sisters Sara and Maria along.

In the autumn of 1914, another big event occurred, and interested me as a child, but I could not understand. My parents said that there was a big war between Russia and Germany. Then a number of our young men including brother Peter were sent to government jobs in forestry. Very unexpectedly, brother Peter returned with a cane. He had damaged his leg, and it was infected. At home it healed. Then, a parcel came in the mail. It was a little wooden box. Inside was a little black horse carved out of wood, and mounted on wheels, about 25cm high and 35cm long. I was so glad for it—but then I learned it was for Kolia. Sister Maria had sent it from Turkistan. After many questions, I found out that my mother was not Kolia's mother, but sister Maria was. I already had heard that sometimes girls had children too, without fathers. So, would Kolia ever have a father? All my questions did not get answered.

And the war was on. By that time, father had been village headman many times. Around our dining room table, the men of the village would gather to package sugar, tobacco, mittens, socks, and other items the women had knit for the troops. On top of that they also sent roasted buns in the soldier's packages.

Then Hans came home and told us he had enlisted as an orderly in the medical corps. He had done this by himself, and would now be going to Moscow (something which didn't happen quite like he'd planned). With him went his friend Johann Isaac. One day, sister

Anna arrived from Molotchna. Her husband, Johann Ediger, had been called up into the medical corps. Anna was considered very strict by her younger siblings. We thought perhaps this was because she spoke High German since she had been at the deaconess school studying nursing. The teachers there had been very strict too. Now when she was home it became more difficult for us. She was always angry, cried a lot and wouldn't eat at the table. Elvira and I didn't like it at all. But there were the others, Tina, Gerhard and Liese. They weren't angry, and we had good times. Later, when I was older, I discovered that when women were expecting to give birth, they didn't feel well, were nervous, and were easily angered. That's what happened to Anna. She gave birth to a baby boy.

Russia's involvement in the war made things uncomfortable. It also brought worries, especially to those with sons in the battle zone like my parents. During this time schools were not allowed to teach in the German language. Our school buildings were closed and locked up. To offset this, a provisional school was organized in our home. Brother Hans had looked after it until he enlisted. Later my sister Tina took care of the school until it became illegal, and we were afraid to keep it open.

[40] The government made things very difficult for the Mennonites in every respect. All village meetings were banned, but the political spirit of the Germans grew steadily. Religious services were banned too. That was expected. One Sunday when my parents returned from a Mennonite Brethren church service in a neighbouring village, they were very serious. We didn't know what was bothering them. But in the evening Bible study, very important issues were discussed. Naturally we were all there. Then it was made very clear. Czar Nicholas II had signed a decree that all Germans in Russia (or perhaps only in European Russia) were to be evicted. It wasn't clear where they were to go, Siberia, or Germany.

Our Mennonites knew Siberia had long, cold and snowy winters making it very difficult to get ahead, or make a living. Already years ago, because of the land shortage, a number of European Germans and Mennonites had settled there. Our churches were in communications with them. Often, we gathered to send packages out to northern Siberia. Very often these contained dried fruit because they had none. Warm clothes like stockings, mittens, and warm under clothes were sent too. We also knew that Siberia often had crop failures. So, the Germans there could be very depressed. Our own Mennonites were extremely serious about the prospects of going to Siberia. Yes, many, if not most of our Mennonites were tied to their homes and properties. But at this time, no one knew what would happen so naturally correspondence with Siberia became very active. People wanted to find out about the possibilities if they had to settle there. For a while the authorities seemed to do nothing, and the war was still on. But among the Mennonites, everything was quiet. The only things that changed was the removal of certain freedoms.

But the discussion arose over what to do with the children who were supposed to enter the first year of school. This was a growing group since it had been two years without schools or teachers. And who would be the teacher? This was when sister Maria had come home from Turkistan, and she was asked to undertake the teaching. She was fortunate at the possibility of being re-habilitated in the village, church and family—and within herself because of her indiscretion. After looking at the curriculum, she accepted. Our parents

seemed to be buoyed up by this. After my sixth birthday in June, I entered this group of about 18 children, and started school in the fall of 1915.

Then mother fell and broke her lame leg for the second time. There was no medical help. Grandmother was in Sagradovka having married minister Martens. [41] Peter, Maria, Tina, Gerhard, Liese, Elvira, Kolia, and I were at home. Mother was bed ridden for many weeks. Then I came down with pneumonia. Cold and wet winter weather set in. It also was cooling down at home, not physically cool, but because there were so many unanswered questions, and worries about the future. Everyone was concerned about the situation. Mother, lying in bed with much pain, could do nothing. There was concern over sister Sara being someplace in Turkistan. We heard nothing from her. Mail service was very poor anyway. And what would happen to Hans in the war? No letters either. Peter would be 25, and couldn't find employment, became bored around the house, and stayed away a lot. He wanted to get married, but then what?

Father became very, very quiet. He sat for hours in his room, or on the oven bench, and stared into space. He lost much of his reddish-blond hair, and what was left slowly turned grey. Quite by accident, one of Maria's art scribblers came into his hands. He found beautifully artistic scenery, streetscapes and ornamentations. Maria used these drawings for embroidery patterns. Then father saw a drawing of the mill, the yard and all the buildings, and recognized it immediately. It brought back his own memories of the street, the village close to the hills, and the valley. He realized how he had missed seeing Maria's artistic talent because of his own careless preoccupation. Mother later told how father had spent these difficult lonely times, how his mistaken ideals for the financial good of the family had de-railed his moral principles, ending ultimately in loss. Father thought he had to analyze all his deeds of the last thirty years to deal with these troubling emotions. He had to understand the depth of the losses that occurred while he had been striving so much for that mill.

After self-evaluation, and much repentance, he came to the following decisions.

He knew that he had always carried such feelings since childhood, not because he wanted to, but because he had been emotionally abused. He had begun in absolute material, moral, and spiritual poverty. But because of his good physical health, around gifted men, and the right circumstances, he had become something bigger. Because of all that had happened, he had never gone back to his home, or his brother's home, where he had grown up. He hadn't wanted to blame them, but he had blamed them. That was the first mistake. When he had overcome the past, he decided to redeem part of his former life. [42] Having achieved purpose, he hadn't thought it was wrong to get ahead. But in his battle, he had never been satisfied.

He often said, "I left room for my own egotism, and that was my second mistake. I finally figured out something for Peter to do so he could get ahead, and that was the third mistake. I handed him a place in the mill, but he rejected it. What a mistake to send these two children out there alone. We could have avoided so much pain. Now I know if I had sent Maria to art school, it would have been better. How much better her future would have been if only she could have followed her own talent. Why didn't I know she had this

wonderful gift? Because of the mill! Hans had to stop school. Tina couldn't continue either. How much she wanted to go to medical school! Yes, I have often not given my children what was rightfully theirs. And how much better for them, and their future, if we had stuck to farming. I was healthy and strong; we were well to do, and respected in the village—even the district! I should have been satisfied but wasn't. That was my biggest mistake, not just a mistake, but unrighteousness—sin. And for sin we are punished. We have to repent and take the consequences.”

This is the way mother would tell us about father's thinking during that time. Mother had tried to help and encourage him, but she had had little success.

There was also another thing. He asked mother if she could be quite clear on why the Mennonite had settled here, and now were being sent away? Of course, mother could say little about that. But father insisted that these measures that the Russian government now was taking were not just because of the war with Germany. No, in all these years father had often had to meet with the police or government officials to discuss various issues because of his administrative office. Father told mother that he was convinced that the Russians were not happy with the Mennonites because they had become so dominant, and looked down on the Russian people. “I should have done more,” father said, “and could have done more in the village. People listened to me, and trusted me in our dealings with the Russian people. I could have done more to bring a closer relationship with these people. Where our brothers failed, I could have been more encouraging for their improvement. Now it is too late. Now the Russians are preparing to spit us out the way you spit out bad food. No, no, Anna,” he said, “I have not used my position and influence and ability, so I am full of regret.”

[43] And the war went on. Brother Hans was often with his hospital train in Moscow. During those times he would occasionally get a few days leave to come home. We were always glad to see him. Father was especially glad to see his son. Then he would ask how things looked at the front. Brother Hans enjoyed discussing his experiences and thoughts about the war zone; father enjoyed listening. The topics were always the strength of each side, the losses and gains, and the moral attitude of the Russian soldiers. During discussion one thing became clear: the Russian military's positive attitude toward revolution was intensifying. “Yes,” Hans said, “the army is agitated, and it looks more and more as if revolution is snowballing.” Father became increasingly uneasy.

More and more father saw that the Russians, and the government were on the brink. A day of reckoning loomed on the horizon. People's anger was not so much against the Czar, but against the government, and corruption. Still, the Czar was responsible for everything, and was in great danger.

During this time Peter married. It was neither a hot nor cold wedding. He married Anna Born. Her marriage finally ended a turbulent youth. This young couple lived a short while in our summer kitchen. Then everyone got together and re-modeled grandmother's house. It had been rented for about 15 years, and had been abused accordingly. In the last years the house had been rented by a Jewish family named Hershky. (Grandmother had said he was a tailor.) Cleanliness and responsibility were not their virtues. (Shame, and other

effects of irresponsibility, are not common Jewish traits we have seen in our country.) No matter how long the house had been used and never cleaned, it was short work to our many hands, and brother Peter moved in.

Every day the war went on, things became more and more scarce, especially among the Russian farmers. They were encouraged by activist revolutionaries working covertly, and openly. Lenin's communists were subverting the population. Soldiers and farmers were all in a frenzy over steps the Czar would take against the farmers and the poor. Then in February 1917, the revolution started with the abdication of the Czar¹ and the inauguration of a provisional government. [44] The Communist Party did not recognize the provisional government. It actually worked to subvert this government, so in October 25-28, another revolution broke out. Three years of war had ruined the economy. Soldiers had hardly any clothes, and their shoes were falling apart. The granaries were empty, and soldiers were exhausted. The new communal government brought peace for Russians. With the peace of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, the German state army retreated from its occupation of Ukraine, an occupation that extended right into our village. But the peace treaty referred to peace in elsewhere. In Russia, the war went on. This war was the Revolution. It kept on for years and didn't halt everywhere at once.

The Revolution

Although the war had devastated much of Russia's economy, not all regions were equally destroyed. Not all people in every area had been affected. German farmers had not suffered as much as Russian farmers, and the Mennonite farmers even less. Why? What were the reasons?

Firstly, the German people² were more productive in Russia than the Russians were. When difficulties came, a better farm was able to it ride out with less adverse consequences.

Secondly, only a few Germans were in the war zone where the actual fighting occurred. Few had lost fathers and sons in the war, and their farms, naturally, were doing comparatively well. In contrast, the Russians had 60 to 80 per cent of their male population involved in the war, and removed from their farms. The women and children left at home were unable to do the farm work no matter how small the farm. They had to rent their farms out, or let them go. They also continually sent packages to the front to help their husbands and sons. This made their circumstances much more difficult. Many women in need of money left their homes, and went into some employment, like the railway, factories, or serving German farmers. Consequently, it isn't difficult to see how much better the German farms were doing during the war. Naturally the Germans didn't have it easy from 1914-17. They had their own problems. They always had to consider that at any time the order could come to leave their homesteads. Many Germans who were closer to the front lines had to move, and had nowhere to go, becoming displaced people. Many of these even came to our

¹ 15 March 1917

² In the following section David Toews sometimes uses the terms German and Mennonite synonymously and sometimes in contradistinction. The reader will have to take care with each instance.

village. I can remember that.

When you consider the Mennonites, the consequences of the war were even less obvious. Very few sons had been conscripted, [45] but exceptions, like Hans, were men who voluntarily joined the medical corps. Naturally, these had to stay until the end of the war. From our village, only Johann Isaac, and brother Hans had signed up. Johann Isaac came home in good shape, but Hans barely made it home with his life. But more of that elsewhere. Since most Mennonite families had many children, if one leaves, the rest take up the slack.

It was different with the Russians where two or more good workers were in the army and didn't even come back. Many of those who returned came back crippled! This is just one of the consequences of war.

I really don't think I'm misjudging when I say that the Mennonites were the least affected during the war years. Perhaps the worst for them was never knowing, and always fearing, that they would have to leave their homes, and go to Siberia. But even in this, they should have been able to conquer difficulties. Lenin changed the Czar's directive once he had been deposed. I remember this distinctly because I was eight years old when Lenin's order came in 1918. But here we are only discussing the attitude of the Mennonite during 1914-18, their thinking and their Christian responsibility to their homeland.

Before the war, the Mennonites had been in Russia since 1763, a total of about 150 years. The right to their way of life had been by government permission. Had they realized their responsibilities? In their agricultural schools, had they offered anything to the Russians? Had they even opened one experimental farm where Russian farmers could learn methods of agriculture and animal husbandry? No, they had not. Had the Mennonites in any way taken any opportunity to influence the Orthodox Church's beliefs? Oh yes, in 1869 there was a Mennonite minister, a K. Unger, who had baptized some Russians and accepted them into the Baptist Church. And there was Masajew and Fimbau who were leaders in the Russian Baptist Church. Hadn't the Mennonites already made efficiencies in the industrial areas of the country before the war? Oh yes! The Mennonites had owned hundreds of mills, oil presses, and factories for making brick and machinery. Industry was created and nurtured by Mennonite businessmen. Father was also half an industrialist and entrepreneur, and later repented of it greatly. [46] That is the way it was with the responsibilities and privileges of the Mennonites.

War and the homeland? The Mennonites had little to do with the war because they practiced non-resistance. And when it came to the wellbeing of the homeland, when enemies came to destroy it, well that was none of our business because we had no earthly homeland. And of course, there was no feeling of attachment to this land as home. Mennonites loved the land because it gave them the freedom to work it. Germany had spit out the Mennonites because they would not join up in defense of the country. Poland, on the other hand, had not insisted that they should enlist because they didn't want them to suffer against their faith. But in return they should work the land for the wellbeing of the country, and learn to love the country. The land in Poland was really loved by the Mennonites with much hard labour. Eventually, they had acquired so much land that the

Poles felt threatened. Because the Mennonites withdrew from the Polish people, they were despised and expelled.

In Russia, again, we were endowed with privilege, and assistance governed by this principal: We are for you and you are for us. By this arrangement, both Mennonites and the Russian government put close boundaries around what would be given to each other. Anyone who studies the history of the Mennonite in Russia¹ knows that when the Mennonites were pulled up sharply by the Russian government for not fulfilling their responsibilities, the Mennonites just up and left. They went to Canada, the USA, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Australia, and who knows where else—even Africa. Mennonites did not consider any country as a homeland, as home, yes, anywhere they could live and get rich by their own principals. But to suffer and sacrifice for that country, that has never been one of their values.

And so, I have now arrived at the Christians, and their responsibilities to Russia.

One Christian principal is not to return hate for hate done to you (Romans 12). This is how Mennonites put this belief into practice. When war began with Germany in 1914, the Mennonites sent a declaration to Czar Nicholas II in response, swearing their loyalty. (They had really done this!) When the war began, they sent parcels to the front, and their young men had joined the medical corps.

But when the Czar's order in 1915 threatened to evict all Germans from Russia, the friendship with the Russian government ended. That Germans were in shock was understandable. But wouldn't it have been so much better if they had thought about this, and wondered why the Russian government took such a radical position? Shouldn't they have given it some thought, and tried to work out some of the misconceptions? [47] Shouldn't the Mennonites have been able to freely offer them more understanding since they were our landlords? Shouldn't we have asked what we could do, where we had failed, or how we could do a better job? With such an attitude, if they had believed in this way, would their furiously declared Christianity have been opposed? Shouldn't they have gone to the Russian people and helped in their difficult situation with a sincere concern, and honest repentant? Shouldn't the Mennonite farmers with their well-fed horses, taken ploughs, mowers, etc., and gone to the families of the Russians with men at the front, and done their work for them? Shouldn't they have by their actions shown that although the Mennonites didn't go to the front, they did their share to help the people of the country as much as possible? And if they wouldn't shed their blood for Russia, they could have at least offered their sweat for the country, to show the people that they understood the heavy burdens being carried for their own land.

But no! This wasn't their type of thinking, and didn't cross their minds. It didn't occur to them, even when they saw all these necessarily small fields not worked, lying untilled. And more, and more of the women of the fallen men coming to the German farmers with tears in their eyes asking for employment among the Mennonites because they had not been able to work their own land— some even losing it. They were doing whatever they could

¹ *Written in the margin:* I have only written very few words about it.

to keep their children and elderly alive.

The Mennonites didn't appreciate the privilege of their economic situation as farmers. It seems that they were selfish by nature. That's the way they wanted it, and that's what they liked. Could it be something other than pure selfishness? Well, it wasn't only selfishness that seemed to emerge, but hidden in this attitude was an unspoken feeling of 'It serves you right' which the Mennonites demonstrated to the Russians. At the same time, the sending of parcels to the front petered out. Sending such parcels was encouraged until the Czar sent out the edict that they would lose their farms. Afterwards they didn't send parcels.

Since the edict, people's faces appeared filled with anger and disrespect. And they looked down on the Russian people. "It's fine—whatever happens to them." Every conversation contained, "Let it be to them." No, a real Christian nature should have love for neighbor, even love for enemies. Shouldn't they have realized this? Think of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There wasn't even a desire to leave a good reputation behind if they were ever sent away.

During all the war years father was the village administrator, and he often mentioned how difficult it was for him. [48] He was not enthused about the thinking of the Mennonite majority. But what could he do about it? After the fiasco with the mill and the resulting heartaches, he was a broken man without energy to assert his own views.

The Russian people who hated the Germans were very disappointed that the Czar's edict of eviction was never enforced. The Russians were very angry and retaliatory with both the Germans' attitudes, and better conditions during the war. Many Mennonite farmers had treated their Russian workers as worthless. It seemed that the richer the German, the more strictly he treated his workers. Now when the Revolution broke out, many of those same Russian workers allowed revenge into their hearts. Now they could finally get back, and avenge themselves for their treatment. Punishment meant getting even.

Bands of people with similar feelings joined forces, and took advantage of the lack of civil authority. They went through the land destroying what they could. Generally, they came by horse into villages at night to steal everything, mistreat the villagers, and chase them away. This was the least they would do. When alcohol was in control, or with self-justification, it wasn't only stealing, but murder, rape, burning, and more burning. The most feared of all the anarchic bands was under Makhno's leadership¹ with Marusya as his right-hand man. The Makhnovist bands treated the rich landowners, mill owners, industrialists, and their families most severely, and more frequently. During one such vendetta, Grandpa Martens had been murdered.

If during the 1914-18 war, the Russian people had suffered much, then during the Revolution the Germans suffered much more. Many were murdered. All was stolen. No

¹ Nestor Makhno, at age 11, had worked as an ox driver on a Mennonite estate.

German family was exempt. Basements, attics¹, barns, sheds—all were in complete chaos, if not destroyed. Farm machinery was stolen, broken, or totally destroyed. Few cattle survived. Once blossoming Mennonite colonies were devastated. Many families lost fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. Now the Russians gloated. Yes, most of the beautiful achievements of the Mennonites were gone. But these were not the biggest losses for the Mennonites.

Not only the Russian army under their great generals, Denikun, Yudenitsch, Krasnow, and Koltschak, but also the common people under Leo Trotsky (later under the Red Army), all these battled across the great Russian countryside from the Baltic to Vladivostok. Many young Mennonites joined their own Mennonite militia, the *Selbstschutz*², under the control of officers from the Russian army³. This militia, then, would fight against the Red Army when it came into the Mennonite villages. With this action, they broke with one of the most important principles of the Mennonite confession, not to bear arms.

I can vividly remember how one small group of these splendid riders all armed with pistols, swords, bayonets, and etc., came onto our yard. Father had been sitting in our hall, and seen the approach of the soldiers through the big window. He went into the yard to confront them as they approached the house. He hadn't recognized them right away, but when these men came to father, they said, as with one voice, "Good day Uncle Toews." Then father replied, "Good day," he recognized one of them as Kornelius Pauls from Nikolayevka where brother Hans had attended high school⁴. Father was very shocked because this was the first time he had seen an organized Mennonite militia. Right away he said, "What on earth is going on?" The soldiers were invited in and given something to eat. We children were immediately sent outside. There was a long, serious conversation with these young men— 'Adventurers' my father had called them. He let them know exactly how he despised what they were doing, but to no avail. They had decided to go after the Red Army, to keep them off their necks, and out of their homes. Finally, father had said, "I will pray for your life, and that the Lord may give you wisdom. But my blessing you shall not receive." They rode away. My father was seldom as upset as he was about that episode. Father was sure in his belief of supporting his homeland. But about the idea of putting theory into actions, he was less sure. Sure, it looked heroic to ride out in arms, but... Father was always unsure whether we were not too single minded about the idea of Mennonite non-resistance. But he was surely against protection under the terms of these young men.

This is how he came to this conclusion. Father realized the decay of the Czar, and accepted the people's dissatisfaction. A decision about this Russian government would have to come, and father could understand the inevitability of revolution. Much of this he and Hans had already discussed. As guests of the Russian people, we should not involve ourselves in what the ordinary Russian people wanted to accomplish. The Mennonites had

¹ *Written in the margin:* The Germans generally stored grain in the attics.

² *Written in the margin:* literally *self-protection*.

³ The White army was former Czarist forces; the Red army was composed of Bolshevik revolutionaries.

⁴ *Written in the margin:* They were only distantly related.

told the entire world that they were clearly, and totally non-resistant. [50] Under no circumstances should that be broken. Father knew that these young men had only taken up arms to protect their own homes. But from a Christian standpoint, protection should be left in the hands of God.

Sometime later, we learned that four of the five riders who had come onto our yard had lost their lives. No one knew where they were buried. My parents knew their families and their long, hard suffering. They wept at their sons' deaths, and disobedience to the advice of elders that led to those deaths. One of those five comrades just barely made it out, and was able to flee to Canada where he still lives. His name is K. Pauls. In 1980 when my wife and I were in Canada thanks to the help of our beloved nephew Henry and Margaret Toews, my brother Hans, and my wife's family, we visited with K. Pauls and his wife. The Lord has given him about 65 years. This affair with the *Selbstschutz*, organized by some unthinking young Mennonite boys, dearly cost the whole Mennonite people in Russia. The Russians were able to find most of these militiamen, except those in foreign countries, and after their trials, execute them.¹

The 1920s

By 1920, slowly but surely, the Revolution had receded. Fifteen to twenty million people had been massacred.² The impact on the land had sunk the economy unbelievably low. As a result, crop production was down, and prices were high. Almost nothing was available. But even the little that was produced wasn't realized because of the poverty of the land. Crime grew steadily. It seemed that those even barely alive would have to suffer for all the bloodshed, evil and destruction which had occurred.

[51] In 1921 and 1922, the soil was punishing. Those who perpetrated evil and their victims had to bear its fruit in these years. Crop failures and extreme hunger punished the peoples of this revolutionary land. Meager crops were produced everywhere in those two years. Everyone was hungry to a greater or lesser degree. This is the time that brother Hans brought grandmother home to us from Sagradovka.

In 1922, sister Maria was married with only a very small family circle attending. The

¹ *Written in the margin*: Later, through Stalin's reign (1931-38), their families were in constant terror. Most of them were sent to Siberia for life. From our village, three young brothers of these militiamen, the best workers in our collective, came under the dark cloud. The two youngest were my classmates, and one, a teacher, was even a member of the Communist Party. He was still interrogated and executed in 1938. Not only did they destroy these men, but they used these incidents for the continuous barrage of propaganda which destroyed the credibility of the Mennonite people. They were considered fanatics, and reactionaries to be destroyed. I will write about that later in my own biography. This is how the Mennonites lost almost everything.

² Letkemann's research estimates 3,336 Russian Mennonites, or three percent of their total population, died between 1914 and 1923. See Peter Letkemann, *Mennonite Victims of Revolution, Anarchy, Civil War, Disease and Famine, 1917-1923* (2005).

only other persons were the teacher, G. Neufeld, and Siemens, the officiating minister.

Brother Gerhard had had an accident as a child when he was exercising, and had turned out his left leg. He always had problems walking. Physical work was always difficult. The whole family had decided that Gerhard should study, so that's what he did. A provisional high school had been organized and brother Gerhard went.

Sister Sara had hurt my parents and made them suffer. During the Revolution she had stayed in Tashkent because with the disruptions in transportation, it was impossible for her to come home. She had tried to get home though, and had only been able to get to Moscow. Very few letters got through from there either. So, we finally got a report from her that she was in Moscow, and had married a Russian named Theo Kasansky. My parents suffered a long time as a result. But time is the best healer, it is said, and eventually my parents accepted this, especially after the birth of Sara's son, Stanislov, and daughter, Brunhilde.

Those were difficult years for our family. We still were nine at home: father, mother, grandmother, Hans, Tina, Gerhard, Liese, Elvira and me. Elvira and I attended the village school under G. Neufeld.

In the years 1922-23, Lenin's Soviet government declared their new policy on governance. This policy established the new political and economic plan for the Soviet Union. It meant a free middle class, free trade, both domestic and foreign. New market organizations were made for foreign trade. With this policy initiative, economic growth, and increased production were encouraged. We had nothing; nothing needed was available—no food—nothing. Industries remained in government hands. The government was considered the owner of the entire land. Farmers only worked it. In practice, farmers would get up to 30 hectares for their own use, and the rest was given to farmers who had been landless. [52] There were two kinds of farms: private farms, and soviet collective farms. The latter were on the properties that used to be large private estates. People who wanted land did get their own property. Farmers gained hope through working in competition to become the best, even though they didn't necessarily have big private farms. Competition was encouraged for higher productivity and quality. But private farms had to pay an enormous tax levied by the government. In addition, the state expected a certain quantity of grain would be turned over to it. But Russia's inhabitants had learned to save in those years, and they still managed to better their situation.

How little the Mennonites had learned in these years would soon be made evident. Instead of joining together to enhance the state's agricultural economy, something that would have been appreciated by the government, these Mennonites decided to form a Menno-corporation to negotiate directly with Holland and America. Benjamin Boese and Nicholai Dueck were elected co-chairmen of the Menno-corporation. Binders, ploughs, motors, threshing machines, etc., were purchased. (At that time there were no tractors.) Because of this go-it-alone attitude, the Mennonites were not well thought of by other German-Russians and so they turned against the Mennonites. When the new government agricultural development plan was introduced, this organization was done away with. Both Boese and Dueck were shot. The corporation board was jailed. But already we were feeling the growing negativity in every other way.

Memories of His Homeland

In 1923, the desire for more education became very strong, and so the villages of the Memrik colony began to cooperate to build a middle school in a village 3 kilometres from ours¹. I had been diligently delivering bricks, and it never occurred to me that I might be one of the first students in this school. When people were asked to send their applications, my schoolmates K. Klassen and A. Unruh did. Many couldn't figure out what was going on with me. I had always been a top student, had always talked about further education, but I held back, undecided. Since I was very small, I always dreamed about building machines or houses. Yes, an engineer or architect, whichever happened! But now nothing happened. If you had gone house to house asking why David Toews had not applied, no one could have given you an explanation.

It was my father. He didn't want me to attend, and I have never accepted this. Not one of my villagers understood. But father had his reasons. He wasn't clear about them, but later I learned about them from my mother. She surmised that my father did not trust the principal of the new school, Frank Froese². He was a biologist and evolutionist. Because we didn't at that time understand evolution, Froese was believed to be an atheist and consequently would influence the students to atheism, and father didn't want that to happen to me. [53] It was one of the hardest experiences for me, but I also know that my father didn't want me to be hurt. He wanted only the best, and he couldn't find his way through his conservative attitude. Our traditions were stronger than he was. During the first year of the new school, people realized that it was not what it seemed, that Mr. Froese had been misjudged. Father regretted that he had jumped to conclusions. When I learned his reason later in life, I felt very sorry for him knowing he only wanted my best. He had a real heart for education but had not been able to work through this issue properly.

About the same time, Hans went to Molotschna, and brought home a Triumph motor for the threshing machine. I was consumed with excitement. Then came the restoration of all our farm buildings, of the house, barns and everything. Shortly there was so much work we could not see its end. To all this work, though, I was left alone. Brother Hans married³ and moved to his own homestead. All the neighbours, too, had homesteads to repair and so father and brother Hans helped them out. Father was more than busy. I thank God that I was very handy with wood, metal and other building materials since I was up to my ears in work. This business definitely helped me get over the disappointment of me not going to school. Then we also bought a new American binder. It was a joy to operate. So, I adjusted to giving up studying, and instead farmed with my father.

Anyone looking into the politics, and understand what was about to happen might have figured out that the new farm economy would shortly become much more socialist. We had no idea about this change, but many who could see their way clear left for North America.

¹ In 1922 a secondary school was built in Nikolayevka (Ebental), east of Nordheim.

² Probably Franz Froese. Both Mennonite and non-Mennonite teachers were at the school which was increasingly pressured by the Communist rationalist philosophy. See Heinrich Goerz, *Memrick: A Mennonite Settlement in Russia*. (CMBC Publications and Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society: Winnipeg, 1997) p 57.

³ 14 August 1922.

This was a particularly big stumbling block for our family. America took only the healthiest people, especially eyesight. My mother, sister Elvira and I had trachoma, so the way to America was closed for us. It was different for brother Hans and his family. They were all healthy, and so prepared to immigrate to Canada where my sister Anna and her family had moved in 1922-23. In 1926, brother Hans left Nordheim and Russia. In 1925 sister Lisa married Hans Dueck and had moved away to make her own life. My sister Tina had since finished medical training as a nurse and found work. My brother Gerhard had graduated from teacher's college, and was teaching in the Caucasus with my brother-in-law John Neufeld and sister Maria. So, my grandmother, my parents, my sister Elvira and I were the only family left at home.

[54] After four years of the new economic plan in the new Soviet state, we went from famine to a stage of increasing agricultural activity. As already told, Lenin's idea had been to give Russia a period of rest. Yes, he introduced this idea, and then died on December 21, 1924. Now we entered the fifth year of agricultural recovery—so far, so good. Lenin's disciple, Joseph Stalin, had worked himself into being top man in the Communist Party. Now he would have the first and last word. This affected Russian history. What we had accepted for four years as 'new farming' he said was 'old' and 'outdated.' Collectives were the new way to work the land. The state had bought the first tractors from America, the Fordson, which couldn't be purchased privately. Half-voluntarily, and half-under-pressure, we were forced to socialize our farming. One year the farmstead was kept individually with only the most important work being done collectively. Everyone now could see our ultimate destiny. Individual farms were on their last leg. Many Germans and Mennonites now prepared to immigrate to Canada. In the fall of 1929, a large emigration began, and the era of individual farms died. The collective began, and we followed along.

But before I talk further, I want to tell you about experiences in our family that formed the character of our much-loved father, how we were taught to overcome difficulties, and support one another in difficult circumstances.

Father Gets to Know His Brothers

[55] Communist historians consider the years of the proletarian October Revolution, and the new economic policy of 1917-1923 as a period of War Communism. This meant that every item or product—food for people and horses, clothing for the revolutionaries, every material thing that could be used to attain the revolutionary goal—everything was requisitioned for the use of the state, regardless of our point of view, as long as it furthered the completion of the revolution as quickly as possible!

For example, if revolutionary troops came into the village, their leader had the right to take whatever he thought was necessary. These groups, big or small, came almost every day. Villagers were required to give whatever was demanded within the day—better within an hour or two. Because father was the village administrator, he had to keep an inventory of every person, and every thing in the village—products, machinery, transports, and workers. He had to have a list of how much baked bread there was, how much butter, meat,

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oats, horses, cattle and hogs for slaughter, milking cows, animal feed, mittens, socks, wrapping rags, and etc. If the soldiers asked, they were answered according to these lists. Villagers had to bring the supplies to the Toews' place when requisitioned.

I was between 10 and 13 years old and it was my job to run and inform the neighbours what and how much they needed to bring. If I was at home then that was fine, but when I was in school, I was called home, and either ran or rode wherever I was sent. I soon learned to know people, their reactions, and their willingness—or not—to sacrifice. Many were angry, and yelled at me every time I came.

If we needed basics like bread and butter especially quickly, I knew I could only go to three or four families. I could go to these people day or night—and I did. They would ask how much, and then it was ready. I record here the names of these families with great satisfaction: D. Klassen, P. Dueck, Gerald Rogalsky, H. Hildebrandt. By contrast, remembering bitterly, I mention D. Balsak, H. Unger, Gerhard Warkentin, J. Dörksen and H. Friesen. May God forgive their stinginess. Recording the church to which each of these people belonged would be excessive.

Since then, I have often heard my father say that we shouldn't get too excited about this, but instead say, "You can learn from each one if you open your eyes" (my father meant his 'other' eyes, but also his physical ones). Then he would always add, "Judge everything and keep the best" (I Thessalonians 5:21). I must really say that we children learned much in those difficult times, and so did my father. He said he really learned to know his brothers, sometimes quite necessary.

[56] Once when I was somewhat older, I asked my father what he meant by the word 'brother.' Did he mean the entire Mennonite brotherhood, or his biological brother, or his church brothers. Immediately he caught my intention and answered "Everyone is our brother; we should keep each person as a brother." Oh well, I didn't yet find out exactly what he meant, but I did very soon.

We had uninvited guests almost daily, either with requisition orders, or not. But we always had to feed a few horses, and many times send a bag of feed along with them. When spring came, and we should have been seeding, our own horses were finished! They were so weak that in the morning we would have to help them get up to stand on all fours. All that was left was chaff. There wasn't any seed grain anywhere. Now we had to plough, always the most difficult job for the horses prior to seeding. As our fields greened, our horses weakened. Some of the neighbours' fields were ploughed, but ours still stood green. Father became more and more anxious. If fields could not be ploughed, they gradually dried out, and were useless to cultivate that year. One day, father gathered courage, and went to his brothers in the village—his church brothers—asking them to lend him feed grain. He was not asking for a hand out, nor could he offer buy it. He had a good idea who might have extra since it was obvious whose horses were strong enough to come to church with. We hadn't used our horses for a long time. But his request was without positive result. "I have nothing to lend," was always the answer.

The situation was critical. But then something happened. During our breakfast prayer

with us all standing around the table, father thanked the Lord for the help he was giving him, and that He had heard his prayer, and would get us the needed grain. When we sat down, something didn't sit right with us because we didn't understand the prayer. Now father always was up very early in the morning, and went out into the barn to look after the horses before anyone else got out of bed. He told us that that morning he had found a sack of barley, and a sack of oats beside the barn. If we mixed some chaff with some barley for three times a day, the horses would gradually get stronger and we could get onto the fields.

Father never said who left these sacks there. He only mentioned that he now knew who his brother really was. "It is more important to God, not what a man says or promises, but what he does." Our horses slowly improved and the fields were worked. Father gave me the two sacks to return to the owners, and said I would recognize the owners. They were Klassen and Rogalsky.¹

Jacob The Thief

[57] These years of poor crops resulted in ongoing famine. After the Revolution, the new Soviet government under Lenin and Trotsky had their hands full to put the new government on a solid footing. Poor crops, the war, and communism had emptied the farmers' granaries. Cellars and root cellars were totally cleaned out. The majority of villagers were suffering from lack of food. Many people were left with divided families, homes, and villages. Scattered in every direction, many people did not see their loved ones again. Who could tell where everyone had gone? People shuffled from house to house, village to village, often far away from their homes, trying to beg, borrow, and steal just to keep a miserable life from the jaws of death.

Death took many regardless. They would lie on the roadside, not able to go further. And in a day or so, it would be their last resting place. Families would never know where or when their loved ones had died, all because of famine.

Great numbers shuffled slowly along, one barely leaving a house when another would come. They never carried a bag, for there was never enough given to carry it away. They ate it immediately before even thinking. We never saw children come begging in the village. Perhaps they had died already. Fewer and fewer women came. We mostly saw men and young boys. I have already mentioned that the Germans in Russia were treated considerably worse than the Ukrainians during the Revolution. Under communism, they were treated without regard, and everything was taken away. Hordes of begging, hungry, and dying Germans invaded Mennonite villages. Many spoke the same Low German as we did. We didn't ask who they were, or where they had come from—we didn't want to get involved with such things. We simply gave from what we had. Memrik did not experience as much property damage as Molotschna had. At first, we gave them black bread. Then we offered boiled beets. Then we gave them just about anything we could find.

¹ *Written in the margin:* Neither of these neighbours were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, but were real brothers. Now father knew who his brothers were.

Then something interesting happened. [58] It was a remarkable time. During the days and weeks that people were at our doors begging for help or bread—Germans from the area around Melitopol on the Sea of Asov—we realized they were Catholics. When this was discovered, they were rejected. Our doors were not opened to them. “We shouldn’t even allow them into the village!” Who could have thought that this could come from the lips of our brothers, or especially, our sisters? But I have talked about this before.

We came to a year when the crop looked a bit better. Winter wheat was ready to harvest and we could almost cut some with a scythe in places, dry it, and although it stuck together a bit, we threshed it on stones, and ground it up. Here and there the corn was in milk stage, and could be boiled. Early pumpkins (usually for pigs) were as big as a fist. Now we would not die of hunger. The spinach, if properly watered, developed new leaves after cutting.

But how would we harvest? Father, sisters Tina and Liesa, and I (only 12 years old) needed at least another adult male.

One day we found a young man, father thought about age 19 or 20, standing by the door begging for food. With only a few words, father sized him up, and unexpectedly asked whether he would help with harvest. He said, “Yes, gladly.” Father appreciated his straightforward nature. “My name is Joseph,” the stranger said. “But you can call me Jos.” So, Jos stayed with us. To satisfy his big hunger, he got a big cooked beet.

In the evening the women began preparing supper—a thin soup, and steamed pumpkin with spinach.¹ At that evening meal, father told Jos about the rules at our house. First, he must attend morning devotions. Second, in the evenings, we locked our doors, so he’d better be inside. We also discussed our religion, and that in our house any other religious practice would be accepted. After supper, father told him that there was a good warm bath for him. If he had lice, he should clean up thoroughly, and he could take our underclothes as needed. We changed constantly because these parasites were very active, and we had to fight them constantly. In many ways, he would be treated just like anyone in the family. He could think about this, and decide to stay or not.

Next morning my father asked Jos for his decision. With resolve he accepted. Father said that while he and I started to cut the grain with the binder, Jos should look around for things to do. Father told him to walk around the yard, the garden, the barn and outbuildings and look at everything. Father was interested to see if he had an eye for this kind of work, whether or not he was a self-starter, or whether he needed a push from job to job. The guy didn’t lose much time in coming to the machine shed where we were working on the binder, and asking father to give him a specific job. There had been some trees cut, and the big pile of branches needed to be chopped up for firewood. Father asked me to go and show him where the axe and sharpening stone was. On the way, Jos told me he liked us, and would stay. [59] Father also found him likeable, and in a short time he was quite at home, had

¹ *Written in the margin:* We only had bread for breakfast, and sometimes a piece for lunch. Only a bit of milk was used for the prips (roasted oats, a coffee substitute). Sour cream was used only for gravy.

become a little freer, and wasn't nearly so hungry. We weren't so hungry either. Jos worked gladly. He and I often worked together.

Sister Elvira, Jos and I could talk casually amongst ourselves, but sisters Liese and Tina were not allowed to. He kept his distance from them, and correctly addressed them formally. Before harvest, brother Gerhard came home for holidays (he taught in Kuban¹), and now could help with harvest. Now there were three men!

Gerhard and Jos got along quite well in the first few days. He had been told that we had hired a Catholic hand, and so he looked at the whole situation carefully. Then he brought a book, and decided to read it with us altogether. It had the title 'The Confessional' and discussed how Catholic priests misused the confessional especially with young women and girls. Jos, who had been to confession, understood this rite, and took particular interest in the discussion. The three of us made a rule to go outside, and lay on the green grass, or in bed after supper to discuss things. Jos soon began telling us about things that were not in the book. We became very chummy, and it seemed right to our whole family. The days passed like the wind.

Harvest was proceeding full steam ahead. We used a threshing system driven by horses harnessed to beam, walking in a circle. The grain needed to be pushed down². Jos was very good at this. Winter wheat turned out just so so. Other grains—oats, barley, and corn—were poor. But there was hope for that winter. People and cattle would have some future with food. The whole village felt very good. And no one felt better than my sister Tina since a good harvest meant she could go into medical training in Moloschna. We already had started to make the necessary arrangements. With difficulty we found material for new clothes, and began sewing. We were able to get everything that girls needed. Sister Liese would have to wait for a while, but she too would have some new clothes. As the barn was filling with the harvest, so also Tina's trunk was filling up. These were just simple things, but we were all glad for Tina who could start toward her objective of studying nursing. The worst of the harvest and threshing jobs were over.

[60] Now Jos wanted to leave for his own home on Saturday. Sister Tina would go to nursing school. Gerhard would return to the school in Kuban. At home it would just be Liese, my parents, me, and Elvira going into grade 3. On Sunday sister Tina, and her best friend Aganeta Thiessen, and sister Liese were going to walk the 4-5 kilometres to the neighbouring village to a church meeting. (Horses should rest.) For Jos we had everything ready too. That's the way our home was. He had worked well, and we were satisfied.

¹ In the Caucasus region.

² Horse teams supplied power to the separator by being hitched to a revolving gear about four feet across lying horizontally. This large gear was rotated at the speed of the horses walking around and around in a circle; and the larger gear supplied power to smaller gears which ran at increased speeds. The drive shaft either was set to revolve just a little above the ground in such a way that the horses could step over it as they walked around the drive gear, or it was suspended overhead. The horses were kept moving with the smart sting of the whip to remind them that it was not time to stop and eat. Sometimes this thresher was portable. Stooks of grain were manually loaded.

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Besides his wages he was outfitted head to toe with decent clothes, a suit, underwear, shoes, socks, and cap. We boys gave him a pocketknife, the girls, a few handkerchiefs. On Saturday, we did the baking. In the afternoon Jos, and all the rest of us had baths. This was the usual Saturday routine. Everyone was busy with their own jobs. After a farewell lunch complete with *platz*, Jos would go to the city on the evening train. We had filled Jos' knapsack with food. Father had paid out his wages. Now father prayed, and thanked God for him, asked for a good and safe trip home, and a happy reunion with his family. After the lunch we all shook his hand, and wished him well. Then he shouldered his pack, and crossed the street on the way to the train station.

After the evening singing of a few songs, we went to bed. Next morning on Sunday after breakfast that we were having a bit earlier than usual so that the girls could get ready, we were talking about Jos being well on his way. But we got a big shock. When Liese was still finishing the breakfast dishes, Tina came out of her room screaming and crying. Everyone wanted to know what was wrong. "All my dresses are gone," she cried and fell around mother's neck. Yes, that's what happened. The drawer where she had kept all her clothes and underwear was completely empty. We just looked at each other speechless! Then Gerhard said that he had thought Jos had been a bit shy toward everyone on Saturday. Everyone agreed that his attitude had been different before he left. He had quickly said his good byes, gotten up, and left very quickly. We had thought his actions were because he was going to leave, not because he had stolen from us. None of us had even guessed something was going on. We all stood speechless looking into the empty drawer. Tina and Liese cried.

[61] Father put his hand on Tina's shoulder. "Don't cry child. Somehow, we'll make it. But now it is time to be visiting your friend Aganeta. She'll be waiting." Father looked at me and I understood.

"I'll quickly run and tell Nettie that you won't come," I said and quickly went to the door.

"Wait," said Tina. "Ask her whether she could come to our place this afternoon. Don't say anything else."

I ran all the way to the end of the village where Nettie lived. She saw me through the window and came to the door to meet me. "What is wrong David?" she asked in surprise.

"Our girls are not coming, but you should come to our place this afternoon," I said all out of breath. Without saying any more, I turned and ran back to the street, but beyond Thiessen's yard I slowed to a walk. Then I thought how rude I had been saying Nettie should come. I should have asked if she would like to come. Well, I considered it further. I would apologize when she came to our place. I wouldn't say anything about it at home.

Soon I was there. Our discovery of this act of Jos and the loss of the clothes caused many questions. My sisters had locked themselves in their room, and cried. "Why? Why did he do it?" we could hear them wail. Mother and father sat in the hall quietly just looking out the big window to the yard, and beyond. Such a time of silence was not to be disturbed.

Gerhard and I had gone into the garden looking here, and there discussing various ideas we had for dealing with Jos if we had caught him at that drawer, or if we went after him, and caught him. If we had! Those were good words for something we could never do. “But I would like to know what father would do if we had caught him,” I said.

“Father,” said Gerhard and he looked straight at me, “Father would definitely have said ‘Do not punish evil with evil.’”

But giving him a good box on the ears would have been just fine—it wouldn’t have been something bad.

After lunch we all met together in silence. Father broke that silence. “I feel how you all are now thinking. But children, let us not be too wrapped up in our own feelings, and be upset. But let us think on what the Word of God says about retribution.”

Mother quoted “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Father continued “I would encourage you children, since our Sunday blessing has been spoiled, to go and read Romans 12 very carefully, verse by verse, and take this along as you leave on your trips.” This last was particularly for Gerhard and Tina.

[62] That afternoon Nettie Thiessen came. When we were sitting at the supper table, our feelings already quieter, and we found other things to talk about. Our parents were quite happy when they found that we were able to look past the difficulties. For going away, may father said, “Now just go to bed and rest well.” Then he added a Russian saying: “The morning is wiser than the evening. We will figure something out and everything will turn out fine.” Father’s words encouraged us, but Tina remained quite sober.

Gerhard stood up. He generally had a verse. Going over to Tina, he laid both hands on her shoulders and sang, “When you’re unhappy, courage flies away, and things don’t work out. You only need to sing a happy song, and surely what you miss will return to your heart. What the dew is for the field, so the song is for the soul.” We all slowly joined in singing with him. Now Tina’s face began to relax and everybody went to bed.

Next morning at breakfast Father said, “Both of you girls, and I are going over to Seledovka¹ and we’ll see whether the Jewish merchant could have anything you could use.” Tina looked happy. “And you boys, go and hitch up the wagon. You know your jobs for today.”

When the wagon came back home, their eyes looked pretty happy. Now there would be more sewing. Anyone who had any skill worked on it: Maria, Anna (Peter’s wife), Tina, Liese, and, on a few evenings, Tina’s friend, Nettie Thiessen. In four days, everything had to be ready, and it was. Friday morning my father took Tina and Gerhard to the train station. Of course, Elvira and I couldn’t go! Tina and Gerhard travelled in opposite directions, Tina west, and Gerhard east, each to their own destination expecting a future to fulfill their hopes. And they were totally convinced that we would see each other for the summer

¹ The Russian town about 7 km south-west of the Nordheim.

holidays in 10 or 11 months. So, it was over.

We often contemplated, and discussed Jos asking the same question: Why had it really happened? Was he really a thief? I did not believe it, and cannot understand it. Most likely he had different circumstances in his life, and could not withstand the temptation that came and defeated him. Perhaps he wanted to bring his girlfriend something after all he was 20, and it would be a good gift. This had overshadowed his guilt. Somehow, I could never justify what had happened. Joseph, his namesake from the Bible, had withstood temptation and not yielding to sin. What would he have done in this circumstance?

Our Covered Carriage Sold to The Gypsies

[63] It was in the first year of the new economic plan. The difficult years of 1914-22 were gone. Agriculture was improving under the new Soviet system. My brother-in-law, Hans Neufeld (Maria's husband), had recovered during the crisis and had decided on an occupation. For the first time he was offered an official teaching position by the church council from an old colony village, Village Number 2 of the Ignatyev Colony¹. (Mennonites were still able to hire their own teachers in accordance with their own ways.)

Hans Neufeld belonged to the Mennonite Brethren church, and soon became acquainted with a couple by the surname Peters. Birds of a feather flock together! Their similar values also meant they had become comfortably acquainted with our family too. They were from a very wealthy family that wasn't naturally advantageous. In spite of the stable moral rearing in both homes they lacked instruction in a sound work ethic, and finance. In spite of the inheritance that had been brought to the marriage (their parents had died), their finances went downhill, and things became very difficult for them. Experience teaches that this leads to lamentable situations; tough circumstances lead to arguments, leading to further errors of judgment. And so it was with the Peters family.

Friendship with our family had just begun when the Peters asked my father for money. Father trusted people, even those who were not well known to him—even after the mill fiasco—and so he became indebted in this situation. It was an enormous amount that he lent to his new friends. (The Peters' great fortune allowed them to immigrate to Canada in 1923-24.)

One day, a beautiful covered carriage rolled onto our yard, a carriage for grand people. There was even a driver. A young stallion was tethered behind the carriage—a third horse!

Who were these grand people? None other than the Peters! Smiling over his entire face, Mr. Peters got out, and then his ample wife. The driver and team left shortly. The lovely carriage and stallion stayed. Inside the house, with a few words, there was an agreement made that the carriage, and stallion would cover the Peters' debt to my father. Father seemed agreeable to this arrangement, even though it had not been anticipated. This carriage and horse were not going to bring any good to our family. But father couldn't be

¹ Village Number 2 was Romanovka. The Ignatyev Colony was near the city of Konstantinovka, Donetsk Region.

faulted for that. Through it we would realize what people were capable of when they were filled with jealousy, resentment, and wrongdoing.

[64] No one in Nordheim in the Mennonite Brethren church had ever owned such a covered carriage. And to think that Johann Toews should now own one! Some of his church brothers did not think that it was right. Our family seldom used it. But many a sick person from our village was taken to the hospital in it, and slowly the villagers became more accepting, but not father's church brothers. He could tell their displeasure by their attitude. So, father planned to sell the carriage to the gypsies. Of course, we did not agree, and actively protested. Mother remained quiet.

The opportunity to sell came quickly. Every summer the gypsies came through the village, and encamped at the end of the street. Our father had friends among these wanderers, so the deal for the carriage was made as easily as it had been made with father. The covered carriage was gone.

In subsequent years the gypsies returned numerous times, and every time they thanked us for the carriage. The women and children had a nice home and my father wished them peace and joy. Eventually we also grew accustomed. Once father said, "Now children, no one is jealous of us any more, not even the gypsies." When we once asked whether those who had been jealous could have been right, father was quiet for a while. Then he told us that he didn't think that he was to judge between right and wrong here on earth. God would know best, and the situation was finished. When I tell what eventually happened to the beautiful young stallion in the next part you will see what jealousy is capable of. So, I'm calling the next part:

Don't Repay Evil with Evil

Jealous people have trouble dealing with their feelings, being blind even to their own values. With sadistic imagination they will be disturbingly brutal in making things difficult, painful, and full of grief even though it goes against their principles, and they would be against such actions with soul and spirit if it was happening to them. But jealousy against friend or neighbour allows judgement, even the judgement of death, and will allow a person to take the knife to stab one in the back. These, at least, are my observations.

Two years had passed since we sold our beautiful covered carriage to the gypsies. During these years farming conditions had again improved. Then officials of the department of agriculture, on the advice of expert agriculturalists, determined to introduce improved hybrid grains, and pure-bred livestock: horses, cows and pigs. Until now farmers had bred their own livestock without scientific investigation of pedigree. [65] Now in an effort to upgrade, government specialists came to check various breeds we had, cows, horses, and etc., and they would clip their ear with a tag. Such livestock would be given documents to substantiate them as breeding stock, and the farmers could go on using them. Naturally, they found that our farmers only occasionally had purebred animals that they had somehow acquired. No place had very many because the standard was so high. In our village they counted 120 horses and only 3 were deemed pure-bred. And two of those were in our own barn, especially the black stallion. He was discovered to be a racehorse. Beside

him we had a mare, an Oldenburger. Both were prime four-year-olds, healthy, clean—perfect! Yes, they were a great pair and we loved them. We jokingly referred to them as our young couple. The deep black Orlik (eaglet) was going to be a father for the first time as the beautiful brown Polka was almost ready to foal.

Polka was a very careful mare like her mother before her because she was going to bring a new breed into the world. We had to be very patient to await this new foal. Without pride we were naturally very happy to be starting a new family line, but not just for our barn. Our concern for Orlik was now also for the whole community. When we found out about his pedigree, now he would also be stud for every Nordheim stable—a blessing for the whole village. Our attitude was of great satisfaction.

When the government examiners had come to Nordheim, I was home with the two older and two younger siblings. Father had said I was capable of going, and handling this situation without him so he had never come. If I had needed help, I could have counted on enough curious neighbours being there. Everything had gone very well. Even without radios, sensational news always travelled fast in the village, and the pedigrees of these three breeding horses was no exception. Father had heard that Orlik and Polka had been selected even before I came back onto our yard.

Father had definitely not counted on this turn of events. He came running to help when I came onto the yard, and my face confirmed everything. [66] I held the documents for our young horses in front of him. But I couldn't see any look of happiness on his face. He was very sober, his eyes closed, and you could see the look of concern on his face. He carefully read through the entire document, and said, "Well I guess it's all right. They are nice horses." But his bearing did not change. I was so disappointed when I brought my loved ones into the barn. I brought them into their stalls, fastened them tightly, and gave them oats. Then I thought to myself, "Why isn't he happy about this?" But my father remained very serious even at dinner when I recounted that all the neighbours had said they would like to have Orlik as stud for the village.

After a short prayer he said, "We should really sell the horses to the village council." Is it any wonder that I did not agree? Father and mother didn't say a word. After that we did not see father as happy as he had been. It seemed as though he sensed something in his spirit that caused a particular anguish. Later I would understand.

Days, weeks, and months passed. Winter ended and spring arrived with joy. It came a bit early, but we were ready for seeding, and the horses were in good shape. We ploughed the summer fallow.

As usual father was the first in the barn in the morning, and when I went the horses were already fed. We both finished the chores. The cattle were sent to pasture, the horses brushed, and the barns cleaned. Then we went in for breakfast. Afterward we harnessed the horses, and I went into the field. During my work with the plough, I was constantly singing or reciting poetry. My repertoire was huge, and I knew enough to fill the entire morning. Time flew by. My friends, the four horses, were in good spirits.

At noon when I came home from the field everything was routine. The horses were settled and fed. Liese and Elvira had the dinner on the table, and called grandmother and mother. Father and I came from the barn, washed up, and sat down to eat. The horses had to rest for three hours so we took our time eating and visiting. I went to look after the horses and the plough, and went through the garden. Father went to lie down as he usually did. Our parent's bedroom was on the corner with windows looking onto the yard, barns, and drive lane. Here by the window father had his couch. But before lying down he always checked everything on the yard from the windows.

When I came from the garden, I checked that the horses had finished their feed. The two younger horses had finished eating, but Orlik and Polka stood with hanging heads, hardly any feed eaten. [67] I poured some more oats into the manger, but they made no move to eat. I noticed that Polka seemed to have pain in her stomach, and wanted to lay down. So, I took her into the yard, and she lay down squirming. I called father who had already seen what was going on. He came, and sent me to get the two neighbours who had some veterinary knowledge. When they came running it was already too late. No matter what they tried, nothing helped. We saw that Polka's foal was restlessly moving inside her. Once more the poor mare lifted her head as if to beg for help. Then it fell to the ground, and she died. The dying mare had probably felt the foal moving but would never lay eyes on it. When I went back into the barn, Orlik's head hung down as if he was full of sorrow. I took him out onto the yard where there already were a number of neighbours gathering. They suggested we fetch the veterinarian, so they galloped to the next Russian village. He came immediately in a rush.

When the vet saw the stallion, he was already lying on the ground beside the mare, and immediately told us the horses had been poisoned. He knew the horses well because he had been part of the government examiners who had given them their documents five or six months previously. He tried something but it didn't help. Orlik also died.

The vet checked out both animals. A whole group of curious, and shocked people had gathered in the meantime. The vet opened both animals' stomachs. He was now sure of the poison. It was obvious because the intestine was black. The poor animals had suffered much. He also realized that the mare would have delivered within a week, and would have been happy with the little mare foal. It would have looked exactly like her mother: apple brown with two white front feet, and a white star on her forehead. They had been poisoned with rat poison.

The vet encouraged father to prosecute, but father said no. The vet knew father well enough that he would not even attempt to change his mind. The neighbours also knew father would never go to court over property.

But who could be the perpetrator? This was the question everyone was trying to figure out with many loud words, and much quiet thinking. Nobody could come to a conclusion. Mother and my sisters stood crying. I didn't feel much better, but I was filling up with hatred. Father was quiet, and answered little to the unnecessary questions of the vet. Slowly people dispersed.

[68] While taking the vet back home, he tried to find out who I suspected, who could have done this evil act. But with a clear conscience I couldn't give him any name. Yet after even a longer period, people still were trying to find out who the poisoner could be. But because we had not undertaken a concrete investigation, the whole thing settled down.

In our family, however, even with everyone there, there was little discussion, and hardly any laughter. We were grieving because of the painful way these horses were murdered. It left us with so many unwelcome feelings and thoughts. Who was so vindictive against us? And why? It seemed hopeless, trying to figure out who this could have been, who could have poisoned all of our emotions.

Father had noticed my changed behaviour in the house, and my mistrust of the people around us. He was concerned, and tried to figure how to help me, to satisfy my need to know.

One Sunday afternoon, my father suggested we take a look at all our fields, and check if the hay was ready to cut. Of course, this was good for me. I got ready, and went out with him to get the scythe, rakes and wagon in order. After a short afternoon nap, we hitched the horse to the wagon. On the way to the fields, father started asking me whether I had tried to find a connection between people at the time of the carriage, and the death of the horses. Now yes! This hadn't occurred to me. Father went further. In his experience, when he checked out various circumstances that might be put together. We should check all the circumstances that might link the two occurrences, who was involved with both, the reasons, and who held those views, both good, and bad. Was there a common thread? Perhaps we could solve this by finding the similar behaviour, and motives dealing with both things. It had to be jealousy or resentment.

"Firstly, it was jealousy against me," father said. "Secondly it could be resentment against you, David—you could not cover your pride of these horses. Everyone could see that. This wasn't wrong before God, or honest people. We have the right to have joy in our work, but we have to honour God, and not ourselves. If we have integrity before God, our work will be successful. When we become proud of ourselves—when that pride becomes part of us—God punishes us. Think about this. [69] If God wants to discipline us, it really does not matter through whom this happens. God chooses his instrument. We have no right to become resentful of God. Now the discipline that God wants to try us, and test us comes through the people God chooses. It is not important that this agent will do it through God, or Satan. It is written: *But whoso shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea* (Matthew 18: 6); and *It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones* (Luke 17:1-2). A punishment should not come through anger but should come through acknowledging the source, then the result is beneficial.

"Listen, when we got that lovely carriage, it was the best and nicest in the entire village. And it benefited the entire Nordheim community. But it was not all right with Isaac Janzen, and his cronies. After I sold that carriage, it was all right. You know, David, that Isaac

Janzen, and I had discussed this, and were friends. It seemed to them that it was too bad that I made up my mind to sell because it had become a stone of harboured dissension. But to me it was very clear that I had to remove all that caused jealousy, and created resentment, so that jealousy would not multiply, so I could establish, and keep the peace.”

“But when you gave me those documents for our horses, I immediately realized that this was just another reason to fan the flames of jealousy. This stallion especially could become a stone of resentment, and I’ve not been wrong.”

“Because of that, you couldn’t be happy,” I interrupted him.

“You are right,” father replied. “But I didn’t want to destroy your joy. I had hoped you would understand when I suggested we sell this horse to the village. But you were very sure, and did not go along with that idea. And I did not want to repeat this suggestion again. Since then, I have not been happy. I felt uncomfortable, and unhappy, not so much for me, but for you because it meant so much to you. And I know that you had become very attached to those horses. Those who were against me, and filled with jealousy would not have gone so far as to destroy the object of their jealousy. They had only wanted to take it away. But your enemy, on the other hand, was against the horses themselves. This enemy’s dilemma was that he loved horses very much, and had ridden, and stroked this stallion. It had given him great pleasure. But now his fanaticism and jealousy grew to the extent that he was willing to destroy those innocents. In this way he would get at both you and me. He was so angry that he was willing to kill the beasts single handedly. [70] And his resolve wasn’t even thwarted by knowing that Orlik would help the entire village—him included!”

I looked father hard in the eye, and he guessed why. “Why don’t you ask me who it was? Yes, I am sure who this criminal is because I saw him. You could also figure it out if you think about it. Who was missing from the post-mortem examination of the horses? Actually, he never came on the yard the whole time, and surely he was aware of what was happening. And he was even a personal friend of the vet! Didn’t you miss the person who never misses anything that happens? He’s always the first on the scene when anything happens. Why he’s always the first to spread the word to the whole village! Wasn’t he most obviously missing because of his physical disability? When he’s late for something he always comes galloping in on his horse! But when he could have come to our place, he would only to have walked across the yard. I told you, didn’t I?”

“That day I got up from lunch and went to my couch in the bedroom. When I looked out the window, I checked the yard like I always do. Then I saw this young man coming out of our barn, crossing the drive to go home. Then he only had to cross the schoolyard. Momentarily I wondered why you didn’t walk with him, but then I remembered that you were still at the table because when I had left, you were all in deep discussion. Now that everything is over, and I look over everything, it is very clear. He came to us with a definite intention to act. If he had met someone, he would have acted as if he was just walking across. If he had wanted to see you it wouldn’t have seemed strange because he often came around noontime. If he had met you, he would have talked a bit, and gone away. His intention would not have been followed through. But he wouldn’t have given up, just waited for another opportunity. Now he came to the barn, heard our discussion, thought I

was also there, and that everything was fine. It was the right moment, and he committed his deed. The horses knew him so there wasn't a problem. No one saw him go his way because no one could see the yard out of the kitchen window. But he didn't know that I had already left the table, and was standing at the window. I never dreamed that something like this would happen. Now you know much more. Now I hope you will guess without me saying his name. I admit that I don't want to name him, hear it, or even see him. He continues to live around us, and I have to learn to accept that. I know you do not always understand me when I consider other people, especially when they really deserve punishment. You will have to learn the peace it gives. You cannot always use strong actions to thwart them it won't change them; you can't win them. Also, I have this conviction that it has not been given to us to judge others. When there is a trial, you have to have a judgement. A righteous judgement is very difficult. Of course, if I wanted to exact revenge, I could make myself both judge and jury."

"You know the culprit. Actually, the culprit is not a real person. He actually has devilish characteristics. I plead for you to slow his type down so that he is not strong enough to drive us to the edge! We will be able to work through this pain before he can clear his own conscience of the horrible murder."

"And another thing son, you are just beginning to understand life. It is quite possible that you will have many more difficulties. Train yourself, and discipline your quick and angry actions. It is not easy, but it will be good for you. The wise man said: Being able to rule yourself is the hardest battle, but to conquer yourself is best."

It didn't take much to see who this person was, the person that father didn't even want to name, but it took a lot to take his advice about self-control. During Stalin's time this man was shot.¹

The Disloyal Michael

[72] Michael² helped us during threshing season for several summers. He was a nice lad from a vast Russian province. He was modest, hardworking, and agreeable. We liked him and let him know how pleased we were. We did not fight over his salary. When he was done the work season, he received his money and new clothes. When he was ready to return home, we took him to the train station, just the same as we did for family, for sister Tina or brother Gerhard.

The threshing machine, and straw blower were motor powered by long, wide drive belts. Michael didn't have a hard job because we used a reaper-binder, and he didn't transport many heavy sacks. His contract was a satisfactory arrangement to both parties.

¹ *Written in the margin:* After 70 years I can name the murderer of the horses. It was Isbrand Friesen, our neighbor.

² *Written in the margin:* Russian: Майкл

Michael was aware of our rules having been at our home over three harvests. He knew that all the drive belts, harnesses and hand tools had to be brought under cover each night, and that the barn and stable doors had to be locked. The cleaning up was distributed among us. Father brought the hand tools under the roof; Michael was responsible for the harnesses; I had to deal with the drive belts. This is the way we worked every day.

However, when we wanted to prepare the threshing machines one morning, we could not find the three long drive belts anymore. When we went to lay the harnesses before the wagon, the best of them were not there anymore either. Both drive belts and harnesses had disappeared. They were gone, and all doors were locked as usual. We could bear the loss of the harnesses, but we could not operate the threshing machine without the drive belts. We were victims of a misdeed from which we hardly any time to recover.

We didn't care about whether the misdeed was a result of sabotage, or envious thievery since we just needed to get working as fast as possible. We also did not discuss who committed the crime. My father wasn't willing to confront the person who betrayed our trust. Instead, we proceeded. Michael and I were instructed to gather the crops from the fields with the wagon to the threshing machine until father returned. Father drove to the main station after breakfast, and travelled to Rostow¹ (at the Sea of Azov). After three days, father returned, and brought new drive belts. We continued the threshing. As for us, we did not change our attitude towards Michael. But Michael had lost his tongue. He had a toothache so that he was unable to speak or to eat since morning. He rejected our offer to bring him to the dentist. He often suffered from such toothaches, and it would eventually go away. But Michael couldn't look anyone in the eye. Apparently, his neck became crooked, and he bowed down his head deeply more often. My sister Tina, who already had some idea about nursing and medicine, offered him ointment and massage. He refused her offer.

[73] The time flew by, and the end of the threshing season came closer when we would be done with harvest and would thresh out everything. Surprisingly, we were very quick in those last weeks which might have had something to do with the new drive belts. We just had to finish the cleanup, and harvest the late crops, such as potatoes and turnips, about a week more. After that, Michael's contract was supposed to be terminated. Yet, Michael terminated the contract right then while we were still busy with the straw stacks. He gave the reason that he did not feel well. My father offered to have him visit a doctor again, but he continued to refuse since he just wanted to go home. Anyways, it was obvious that Michael was sick since he really looked frail. Also, a doctor would not have been able to heal him. He could only have treated himself through an honest confession, but my father didn't want to force one.

Father accepted Michael's early departure. Father asked my mother and the girls to prepare laundry, clothing and pastry for the next day. Everything was as usual. We ate breakfast together and packed Michael's backpack in advance, and I went to prepare the buggy to bring him to the railway station. However, something unusual happened. Instead of him packing the rest of his belongings, as I believed, he snuck out the back door of the

¹ Rostov-on-Don (Ростов-на-Дону)

stable, went through the garden, and fled. In the meantime, we waited for him at the buggy to say our goodbyes. I left my waiting family to offer him some help, but I couldn't find him. He wasn't in his small room, or anywhere else. The back door of the stable was still open. Michael left without a trace and we never saw him again. He was certain that we would not chase him, and he was right.

The Unlucky Sleigh

The year of this event, the autumn was long and warm. We already gathered the harvest, and the fall wheat was sown. The turnips, potatoes and the other vegetables were in the cellar. We slowly harvested the last stubbled fields. We were content with the harvest. Besides this, I supplied my workshop with all the necessities to repair and produce some farm implements during winter. The size of our family had decreased. My sister Liese had married. There were five of us now: grandmother, father and mother, my sister, and me. In short, our farm used to be much bigger, but at least we had no 'liabilities'.

On one sunny day in autumn, my father was invited to a neighbouring farm to serve as an auctioneer for a farmer we knew. [74] That was nothing new to my father. He was experienced in serving as auctioneer. At this auction, someone also sold a sleigh. My very knowledgeable father had never seen such a sleigh. It was an elegant masterpiece. After having a close look at the sleigh, my father was determined to achieve a high price for it since this sleigh had some obvious value. Nevertheless, the auction came to a halt at one point. My father, not being satisfied with the offered bid, intervened in the auction by offering a higher bid in order to continue the bidding. But no one outbid my father! So, he had to take the sleigh even though he didn't want it. In discussions with some of the participants of the auctions, it turned out that they had assumed that my father had been genuinely interested in purchasing the sleigh, and no one wanted to force him to pay a higher price. Without knowing it, they did a disservice to my father. Father returned to our farm with the sleigh on his wagon but he didn't look happy, even though it was not that expensive.

We never actually used the sleigh. When he purchased it, the sleigh had already reminded my father of the covered carriage that had caused so many problems. We secured the sleigh in a dark corner in the big barn. My father waited for the right occasion to sell it, and such an occasion ultimately came.

The era of the New Economic Policy from 1923 to 1928, which Lenin put forward, and the Communist Party adopted, served primarily two main purposes. Firstly, it intensified agriculture for increased food supply in a very short time. This was because the number of farmers had increased significantly because formerly landless people had been given farmland. Secondly, it would influence the peasantry to adopt socialist behaviour.

It was much easier to impose socialist behaviour in industry because the situation of the working class did not really change except that they took over running the factories instead of the capitalists. Unsurprisingly, the workers were happy about this shift in power.

The situation of the peasantry was fundamentally different. A large portion of the

peasantry was made up of landowners. Farmers had various sized farms but they were not allowed to be more than thirty hectares. The New Economic Policy aimed at spreading a sense of community among the peasants during its five-year period. Farmers would join the working class to build the socialist society.

The Mennonites who understood the policies of the Communist Party started immigrating to America from the beginning of New Economic Policy in 1923. But the vast majority of Russian-Germans were deceived by the idea that a new kind of agriculture was emerging, shaped by individual landownership instead of ownership by large estates. [75] The latter refused to leave Russia. Their decision brought them bad luck.

Our brothers increasingly became aware of the degree of the planned socialist re-education of the masses which Stalin promoted after Lenin died in 1923. The public authorities strongly urged the masses to adopt collective action and property. By contrast, they increasingly limited, discouraged, and inhibited individuals who planned things on their own. By 1928, the collectivization became offensive with the establishment of the tractor cooperative for the joint use of land. The German-Russians became increasingly convinced that collectivization was irreversible, and that emigration was the only way to escape the plight.

As a result, the German-Russians' desire for emigration rapidly spread until it evolved into an unprecedented mass wave of German migration from all Soviet republics. In autumn of 1929 they sold everything they were still allowed to sell, and travelled to Moscow and rented apartments in the surrounding areas. From there, they tried to obtain the documents necessary for emigration to America. Larger agricultural machines, (e.g. tractors, motors, mowers, threshing machines, and so forth) had already been nationalized so that they could not be sold. Other items such as plows, seeders, all sorts of wagons, sleighs, furniture, horses, and cows were sold at ridiculously low prices. The German-Russians emigrants were not allowed to sell their private houses and farms. Land had been become state property soon after the revolution. Germans from all over Russia gathered around Moscow.¹ They formed groups, and elected leaders to represent them in obtaining travel documents. Most of the German-Russians went to Brazil². The majority of our Mennonites were able to emigrate. Then the unseen emigration wave also affected our family, which only consisted of four persons at this point: father, mother, my sister, Elvira, and me. My grandmother was together with my brother Peter who lived at her house. This is how we spent the first days of our stay in the Moscow area. We were informed whenever a train of emigrants was leaving for a foreign country from Moscow's main station. The German-Russian emigrants were eager to be there to wish those departing, often relatives or acquaintances, a safe journey. That also allowed them to learn how the departure went.

¹ For Canada's Role in this see Andrey I. Savin, *The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites from the USSR: An Examination of Documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. Journal of Mennonite Studies, Vol. 30 (2012)

² Those who emigrated from Moscow went to Canada, Paraguay and Argentina. Those who escaped later over the frozen Harbin River into China were finally allowed to go to Paraguay and Brazil by 1932.

The family of Johann Toews¹, a *Zentralschule*² teacher, preacher at Nikolayevka, and well-known among all Mennonites in Russia, was in the train departing that day. We ran to the main station, in which the train was prepared to leave, and saw how Johann Toews Ms. Toews, and their three sons boarded the train. [76] There were just a few minutes left before the departure of the train. However, KGB³ agents suddenly appeared. They entered the car that the Toews had boarded a few minutes earlier. A little later, these unwanted 'guests' left the car carrying away Johann Toews. Afterwards, we learned that his family did immigrate to Canada but he was brought to the Soviet Union's deep forest. J. Toews wrote several letters to different members of the congregation from exile. One of the Toews in Canada who is not our relative wrote about our hero's exile and death in his book about Mennonite martyrs. He wrote a poem, titled "In the Melting Pot"⁴ during the years of distress, which reached a large audience, despite his isolation in a Soviet prison. I have learned the poem by heart, and I am going to write it down here.

Go again into the blaze
Oh Lord, I am afraid of the burning torrent.
Stop it, oh, merciful Master
I will not suffer from pain anymore
The divine Master solemnly
Observed the fire and one who is melting
He is not suffering from pain; his hands do not grow weak
He is fixed his gaze on the crucible
He is examining the silver; he is holding it up to the light
In the light, it appears to be well done
But slag is more visible, hidden and small
It clouds the mirror, darkens the shine
Go again and again into the blaze
It seethes, and it seethes; nothing can discourage
Until the silver appears in the shining light
He is looking at himself in his silver that is bright
He soon removes the silver from the melting pot
He is pressing, forming and shaping it
The silver is taking the shape of a useful and precious container
So, bring it to the heavenly Father quickly
Oh Lord, do not spare me, if I have to suffer
Although I sometimes lose my courage in my suffering
Oh Lord, purify me

¹ Johann Toews born 25 June 1878; died 21 February 1933 in a prison camp in Kornilovka.

² English: Central school. In 1909 at the Nikolayevka *Zentralschule* in the Ignatyev colony.

³ Комитет государственной безопасности, (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, literally, Committee for State Security). The KGB was not officially formed until 1954, but KGB is used here for any of the preceding security agencies.

⁴ *Im Schmelztiegel*

And bring me back to my Father's house

My brother had studied literature with Johann Toews when he taught at the *Zentralschule*. He was a gifted speaker, and he adhered to his principles in practice. But the Soviet administration thought that he could be useful to motivate his fellow Mennonites to pursue what the government wanted them to do. In this way, we were being deceived while we stayed in Moscow. The Soviet government intervened in the mass emigration movement and refused to provide the necessary documents to those who were eagerly waiting to emigrate.

It happened one night¹. A vast number of cars were prepared and many soldiers were mobilized who went from house to house in the Moscow suburbs to pack into cars both the German-Russians, and their belongings. They were driven to Moscow's main station, where they transported the families back to their home towns in boxcars. [77] Our family returned to Nordheim. When I left the boxcar, I went back to the small town of Kljasma near Moscow² where my sister Sara lived. I wanted to see how the German-Russian emigration had gone, but I was forced to go home again, and accept that the emigration movement had come to a halt.

While the Germans were gathered from the suburbs of Moscow, the KGB agents sorted out their group leaders and brought them to Butyrka prison in Moscow.³ My brother-in-law, Hans Neufeld who was Maria's husband, was exiled to Northern Russia for ten years. There he was imprisoned in a concentration camp, and forced to participate in the building of the White Sea-Baltic Canal⁴.

Our decision to return back to our home turned out to be an unpardonable mistake. At the train stations in Moscow, there were passenger cars on which were written the names of every hometown with chalk, and everyone had to choose the correct car. If we had chosen to go to the Caucasus where my brother Gerhard lived, we would have avoided our big misfortune. We had all the necessary documents, and we could have started a new life there without any problems and worries. If it had come to the worst, the officials would not have been able to prove that one person from our home village had committed an offence against the administration or the government. We subsequently encountered much trouble due to our return. We soon recognized the mistake we had made, but only when it was too late. Here is what happened.

In the autumn of 1929, when we were selling everything that we could sell in order to go to Moscow to apply for emigration documents, we couldn't find a buyer for the sleigh. The sleigh still stood at the same place when we returned from Moscow. We had never

¹ 17 November 1929.

² One of the suburbs called "The Gates of Moscow."

³ Butyrka prison in the Tverskoy District of central Moscow held political prisoners in the Soviet period.

⁴ The canal was constructed by forced labour of gulag inmates. Conservative estimates are 25,000 deaths during its construction.

needed the sleigh. My father decided to retire¹. I was now in charge of everything we pursued in Nordheim, since I began serving as head of the family. Most villagers had become part of one collective farm (kolkhoz²). Meanwhile, I was employed as a woodworker in a government building project, but I still wanted to live in the village. The officials accepted that, and so I began my work. On Monday morning, I went to my work, and worked for six days before I returned home on Sunday. Everything went quickly. I was a skilled worker and earned a good income. It was enough for us. We would somehow have to figure out what to do in the future. [78] And then something unpredictable happened. One day the head of the neighbouring kolkhoz, Heinrich Rempel, visited our farm. He had harnessed two dappled greys to a carriage, which he drove. Obviously, he wanted people to notice and acknowledge him as his shining eyes revealed. Anyway, his kolkhoz was deemed to be the best and most prosperous kolkhoz in the area. And as the head of the kolkhoz 'Astra' (which according to his fantasy meant 'stars') he wanted to be acknowledged. Besides this, Rempel had served as a teacher for many years. He was well-recognized as a good teacher, singer and choirmaster. He had graduated from a pedagogic secondary school together with Gerhard Neumann, who had been a teacher in our village. Rempel used to be in our village quite frequently visiting his colleague. For this reason, he once met my father at a coffee party hosted by Neumann, and also had had lunch with our family. Thus, Rempel was a friend of my father, although he was a much younger man. In contrast to his colleague, Rempel quickly adapted to the new political situation that Soviet ideology had evoked. Neumann, unable to do so, had immigrated to Canada. Rempel had a different character. He wanted to distinguish himself by his merits, and wanted people to recognize and praise him. In short, he adapted himself successfully to the new conditions. The entire community of Ebental (Nikolayevka) was eager to be ahead, following Rempel's mindset. That was not a problem, but Rempel was determined to take advantage of others.

And now he visited our farm with these precious horses! It was a sunny, warm autumn day. Father sat in front of the house door as the fine horses and carriage rolled into the yard. My father had a bad feeling from the outset. He stood up and he was soon at the centre of the yard as the carriage stopped directly in front of him. Rempel leaped from the carriage and gave his right hand to my father. "Good day, my dear friend, Toews," he said. My father replied while giving his right hand to his guest, "Good day, Andrey Andreyevich." "You have a beautiful sleigh, haven't you?" Rempel said next³. This is how Rempel already touched the reason for his visit. He had come to my father since he had heard that we owned a beautiful, unused sleigh. He said that the sleigh suited Rempel's beautiful couple of horses, and he asked my father whether he would like to sell it to him. The negotiation only took a short time. Rempel purchased the sleigh for 100 rubles. That was a ridiculously low price, but why we should care about the sleigh. On top of this, Rempel offered a promissory note for one month instead of cash. My father accepted Rempel's proposal because he was very knowledgeable about promissory notes. Rempel took the sleigh and my father was happy about this.

¹ He was age 65.

² A contraction of **КОЛЛЕКТИВНОЕ ХОЗЯЙСТВО** (collective ownership).

³ *This conversation is recorded in Low German:* "Gun Dach Onkel Toews." "Gun Dach Good day, Andrej Andrejewisch." "Send dout nich schmoeke schemmils?"

When Rempel refused to pay the promised sum after one month, my father consulted a notary. The latter did not take any official steps but contacted Rempel by telephone. [79] That was too much to bear for Rempel. He now felt that his honour had been offended. When I met with Rempel, he was so enraged that I was seriously afraid of being slapped. He shouted to my face, "Your father should officially test the promissory note. However, we will make use of the sleigh in a way that your father will remember." With that he ordered me to leave his office.

I reported to my father about this unhappy meeting with Heinrich Rempel. He said, "We will survive without the 100 rubles. I was not even thinking about bringing shame to Rempel." At first, it seemed that everything remained the same. My father was calm, and we waited.

But Rempel didn't let it go. He was determined to give my father a warning for his offence. He pondered on it until he had conceived a plan. As an official, Rempel possessed influence with the local authorities.

In the meantime, I had married, and we lived in my family's house. I continued working for the government building project as a woodworker. However, I was forced to decide between two options. One option was that I could have become a worker, and my wife and I would then be regarded as an independent worker family. In that case, we would have been forbidden to be villagers, and I would have to separate from my parents, and leave the village. The alternative was that my wife and I could have joined the kolkhoz as an independent family. In this case, we were allowed to remain in the village and in the house of my parents, and to work as a woodworker in the workshop of the kolkhoz to which our large barn had already been ceded. My wife would have to participate in collective work just like all the other women.

Speaking about my parents and my sister Elvira who still belonged to the household of my parents because she was young, the administration considered them as individual farmers. They obtained two hectares of land to care for and in return, they needed to pay taxes to the government in money and crops. We were aware that this meant not only complete economic and physical destruction in the long term. We already knew in theory what this destruction would look like. However, there was little we could do to change that. I had to decide what to do, or to be more precise, my wife and I had to come to a decision together. My wife's parents also lived in the village, and had joined the kolkhoz.

We decided to stay in the village so that we could help our parents, and observe how misery would come closer to us, in particular to our parents.

The sowing time was over, and the harvest began. We always helped our parents at night. We couldn't do it during daytime, because my wife and I had to fulfill our duties to the collective. The yield of these meager hectares was minimal. That made the harvest simple for us. But no matter how big the yield would ever be, it would never have been sufficient to meet the expectations of the government. [80] The officials soon asked for the first grain tax. The tax was much higher than the yield of the harvest. We bought some

additional *centners*¹ of crops on the market to pay the tax. Next, we needed to pay the tax in money. The tax was so high that we had to help my father to pay it. After a short time, he had to pay more taxes in money again. We were not able to pay this sum anymore. My father would now be considered a willful debtor. The officials would confiscate and sell my father's property to pay back the money that he owed the Soviet government. Father would be considered an enemy of the state, and the people. As a result, he would be deported (exiled by force and sent to a different place).

I will write in detail about how our life continued (mine and my wife's) in the section entitled "My Autobiography."

Father's Escape from House and Farm, and From His Home Village

Not only our entire family but also some inhabitants of our village were concerned about our parents' wellbeing because of the danger ahead. The way that Soviet officials dealt with individuals who did not pay their tax put both father and mother at risk. Despite this, father remained calm, at least on the surface. He said, "I did not commit any wrong. If I am arrested as innocent, it is more comforting than if I would be punished for a crime."

One day my father became even calmer since our village administrator had visited us to assure my father that the prosecution would only affect him, and that my mother was not in danger. Father even asked the administrator whether they would be humane enough to spare my mother from starving to death. The administrator affirmed this and left.

He had been looking at me very seriously the entire time. He had his eyes on me. I had noticed this behaviour, and as he left, he gave me a sign to follow him. The current administrator of the village was Jakob Unruh. He was one of three brothers. He also lived in fear because his oldest brother had served in the self-defense unit during the civil war. He was a hardworking man with a very positive attitude towards my father and me. When I was alone with him, he revealed that if my father did not escape that very night, it would be too late. He should get away somewhere; otherwise, he would be arrested and deported. There was no time to waste.

It was now time to act. When I returned to my father I probably looked quite concerned. Father immediately asked me why I was worried. After I had reported him exactly what our friend had said, he was silent for a while. He then responded indecisively as follows. "You do not run away if you are in the right. I will take responsibility for myself."

I explained that he would not have a trial, and so he would not have the opportunity to defend himself. Instead, he would be deported somewhere into the deep forest where he would perish, to death, as it happened to the teacher Johann Toews (see page [76]). He replied, "What does it matter?" I noticed that my father was determined to fight for his rights even though it was evident that he did not have any chance to win. So, he was going

¹ A *centner* is a nonstandard metric unit of weight equal to about 100 kilograms, commonly used as an agricultural measure in the USSR; similar to a bushel.

to die.

[81] There was only one objection left against father's determination. "Father, I know that you are ready to die for justice. I would be proud of you if your brothers or family benefited from this self-sacrifice. However, you need to consider that our family, your family, would not only suffer during the time of your suffering but also for a long time afterwards, even though your personal suffering would be short. Whatever you do, it matters for all of us. I hope you do not think that we could easily accept not doing everything that could be done to save your life even though you do not care much about preserving your own life. Do you not think that your family possesses a right to your life?"

I saw that my words mattered to my father. His eyes became blank. I took father's hand. I pressed them with both hands, and I added, "Do not flee for your own sake but for the sake of your family who belongs to you!" I noticed how my father struggled with tears, and he then said, "You might be right. Have I been egoistical? Was I too concerned about myself? But where should I go? Where?" Finally, he agreed with me. We embraced each other. He would go to Tina.

The train departed about nine or ten in the evening. So, father had to leave the house at about eight to be at the train station on time. How many times had we brought our servants to the train station? They never had to walk to the train. Likewise, we drove my siblings to the station whenever they left home, and we always picked them up when they came to spend their holidays with us. By contrast, my father had to leave the house on foot! Unfortunately, it had been snowing all day. This was the first snow at the onset of winter. The snow had gently fallen on the ground but the waters were not frozen over yet. A thick snowpack of 40 cm was on the fields and roads. After it had become dark, my father left the house without luggage or walking stick. He wore shoes (he had no rubber boots, or even felt boots), and he had inadequate warm clothing.

This is how he was leaving the home for which he had worked his entire life. In this home he had fathered twelve children, had to bury two of them, and raised the survivors, had coped with many difficulties, but also where he experienced much more joy than sadness as compensation for his sorrows. He shared his sorrows and joy with his little and lame Anna there and had achieved a lot. At home, he not only shed sweat and tears but sometimes also blood. He had spent exactly fifty years in his house.

He was also leaving his home village, to which he had carted water from the neighbouring village. He had not only been the first who transported water, but also the one who did it most frequently, from the founding of the village when he was only seventeen. He transported water despite heat or cold, rain or snow, not only for himself, but for any needy person. He was leaving the village community he had served as village administrator for intervals over 25 years. He had never misused the trust of the villagers, thereby gaining more of their trust. Indeed, he had [82] loyally served the community.

Nevertheless, he was now forced to flee on foot on a freezing, misty night by wading through the wet snow that reached up to his knees to save his skin for the sake of his family. He had come to the village with his brother Peter on a wagon peacefully when he was 17

years old—full of hope. Now, however, he was leaving the village as a 70-year-old, without a walking stick, or hope for his remaining short life because of the injustices and intrigues of an insidious man. He said goodbye forever.

Later, as we were sitting together at my sister Tina's home, where my father had escaped, he described his trip into exile.

"I took the street, the familiar way to the train station at Zhelanaya—the sound of this name reminds me of home. I wanted to take a train at this station for the last time in my life. It was impossible for me to bypass the graveyard of our village taking this route. Passing the graveyard, I spoke quietly to myself: How much I would like to stay here behind this olive hedge. Who knows where the final resting place of my weak body will be, where it will eventually decay? While I was pondering, I continued walking and reached the border between our village, Nordheim, and the neighbouring village Ebental¹. My legs suddenly stopped moving. Where are you going? This will not work. You can't go there. If I continued to go this way, I will certainly go through Ebental. What would happen if someone notices me? Everyone in Ebental knows me. Moreover, my rival, Rempel, lives in that village. If he sees me, I will be exposed. Even if I made a circuit to the train station and someone recognized me, I would reveal myself. No, this will not work. Refugees have no leeway to be thinking carelessly. After a short while I made up my mind, and I went off to Seladovka². But that station was in the completely opposite direction, and much further away, about ten kilometres. I had been heading towards the east where the sun rises, but my sun had gone down. I had to direct myself towards the sunset to the west. Should I cross Nordheim again? The answer was no! I had already said goodbye to Nordheim. And so, I avoided Nordheim, I turned toward the setting sun, and went straight ahead over the fields to the west.

"Soon afterwards, I approached the neighbouring Russian village Seladovka. How many times had I been to this peaceful Ukrainian village in the past fifty years since we had settled here? I had acquaintances on every street of this village. Should I have knocked on the door of a Russian friend to ask him for hospitality? A cup of hot tea would have helped me indeed. I could have dried my wet trousers, and I could have gotten some rest. Would the people understand me?

"I began to feel uncomfortable and ashamed. I was ashamed because I was asking myself, "Whom am I fleeing for?" [83] "What am I hiding from?" I have never run away from anyone or anything before in my life. As I leaned against a tree growing at the entrance of the village main street, the thought of returning entered my mind. If they arrested me, I would be willing to suffer innocently, since I did not commit any wrong. Would it not be more honest to suffer innocently than fleeing like a criminal? I will defend myself! But David had asked for whom I was fleeing? Who would listen to my defense? I would not even have a trial. People like me were not now brought before a judge. They

¹ Nikolayevka in 2021.

² Undoubtedly Johann was very familiar with Seladovka since it had the largest flour mill in the region. It is still an imposing brick building in the town at the head of the mill pond.

were deported without trial. If this happened, I would suffer alone! Alone? Did not my children—my entire family—ask me to escape from my enemies? If I fled, they could be calm, and would not have to worry about me dying in exile. That was my family speaking to me. No, I was not allowed to bring harm to my entire family!

“At this moment, King David came into my mind! Did he flee from his son Absalom for his own sake? Had King David committed a wrong against his son? No, he did not feel any guilt. He fled from the malice of his son and the people. I kept walking. It was easier to walk here since people had already walked on the paths along the street. The houses were still lit up. I passed by the houses of my friends and acquaintances. I hoped that I would not run into any of them. I only stared at the road stubbornly, doubled my pace, and hurried towards the train station. The streets of the familiar village appeared very long, endlessly long to me. Eventually, I passed the last house of the village. My first aim, the train station Selyodovka, wasn’t very far away from there. The road was quite slippery now because it had stopped snowing about an hour ago. Some carriages came towards me, but they hurried towards their own homes so that the coachmen would hardly recognize me. The moon was rising, so the path became bright. I was looking around. I only hoped that no carriage would approach me, otherwise someone might have invited me to go with him. What would happen if I met someone whom I knew by accident? I couldn’t see anyone behind me. I took out my pocket watch from my vest pocket. I saw clearly that it was 11 pm in the moonlight. I still had one hour.

“My home village was behind me. Likewise, the happy seventy years of my life were behind me. There was in front of me a dull landscape covered by snow. A bit further away was an unknown land in which I would perish as a refugee. When I had this thought, my legs stopped moving, and I looked around. I did not see any man on the wide, vast steppe land. I was kneeling at the wayside, and thanked God for my past, and I asked Him for an endurable future. I can’t remember ever crying as bitterly as I did there on that snowy road. I stood up; the train station was now about 100 paces away in the moonlight. I heard the whistle, and the rattling of the approaching train [84]. With this, I hurried up. I went to the cash desk in the waiting area, as the train had already halted.

“I sat alone in my train compartment, and I looked at the watch and at the schedule. I would reach my destination in four hours. It made sense to me to take off my fur cap. I placed it under my head, and fell asleep.

“It was dark when I arrived at Rutschenkovo¹ to get off the train. I had to walk another four kilometres to get to my daughter’s house though. The roads were snow-free, but they were hardly illuminated. Mine workers passed me both directions. I could see that these men were pit workers because of their dirty protective wear. None greeted me. They passed speedily and silently, occupied with their own thoughts. I wasn’t really so much different from them. As I knocked on Tina’s window it was still dark around me. Tina knew what had happened. The tea was prepared in fifteen minutes. Some cups of hot drink did me good. After I had briefly reported the events in Nordheim, she went to work. But I just took

¹ Rutschenkovo (elsewhere Stalino-Rutschenkovo) is part of the Kirovs’kyi District of Donesk in 2021.

off my wet clothes, and fell into bed. Sleep came rapidly.

“When I woke up, I found myself in a new, unknown world.

The Name Johann Toews No. 9 Disappears from Nordheim

Meanwhile, Heinrich Rempel continued to meddle in the affairs of Nordheim. Jakob Unruh, the president of our village, was right when he warned us that my father was in danger. When asked, Jakob Unruh was at ease when reporting the disappearance of the citizen Johann Toews.

The day after my father’s flight, H. Rempel, Jakob Unruh, and Isaak Born, a brother of my brother Peter’s wife, sat down around the big table in our dining room and ordered the entire family to gather there. Rempel asked us because my father was not present, “What about the head of the house? Why do we need to wait for him?” As Jakob Unruh reported that my father was not there, Rempel began to smile, and he said ironically, “Did he escape, and leave his lame wife alone? Whatever. Listen to me, I will read out the minutes of yesterday’s council meeting.” And he then started to read. “First, all assets of the citizen of Nordheim, Johann Toews, are now subjected to public taxation. The revenue from the sale of his property must be handed to the administrator of the village of Michailowka within three days to settle Johann Toews’ debt. Secondly, the citizen Johann Toews is subjected to expulsion (resettlement) because he did not obey Soviet legal regulations. I ask Mrs. Toews and the son of citizen Johann Toews whether they understood that I have read, or if they need any clarification.” I replied to him: “Everything is clear.” My mother and my sister Elvira were crying.

[85] “All right, let us begin now. We need to sell all buildings that belong to Johann Toews’ farmstead. There is a house, a stable, and a barn. I propose that the economic administrator of the kolkhoz, Isaak Born, makes the first offer for the building.” Isaak Born offered 25 rubles¹ (75 German Marks) [*in the margin*: according to the exchange rate at this time] “I entitle you to the buildings since there is no other bidder,” Rempel said. While saying this, he gave his hands to Isaak Born and shook them. “Let us continue. Next, we need to sell the black stud. I offer one rubel (3 German Mark) for the stud,” said Rempel. He then added, “Our chickens will enjoy the meat of the horse.”

Rempel asked Jakob Unruh whether there is more to tax. Jakob Unruh answered that there is nothing left to sell. Rempel said to Unruh next, “In the case that Johann Toews reappears, you are obligated to arrest him and bring him to the militia. You need to sign this order.” Unruh signed the order.

Rempel continued to speak, “Herewith, I declare that Johann Toews ceases to be a citizen of Nordheim. His name disappears from the resident register of Nordheim. A person with the name Johann Petrovich Toews N9 (that was the number of our house) does not exist in Nordheim anymore. His farm is dissolved.” After these words, the three executors

¹ According to Alexey Golubev of Petrozavodsk State University, 25 rubles had the purchasing power of about 1USD in 1931-32.

stood up from the desk and said goodbye.

A bit later, we drove our mother to my sister Tina's where my parents lived together for a while.

My wife and I were allowed to dwell in the house for some time. We then moved to Katja's parents¹. The clubhouse and office of the kolkhoz were then situated in our house. At this time, we believed that Rempel had enough revenge. However, it turned out later that we were wrong. To see that happened after some years, look at page [90] in the section "My Autobiography."

On The Move

On one of the dirtiest days of autumn, we heard loud singing mixed with a lot of incredibly loud noises. At that time, the first snow that had fallen when my sad father had fled partly melted away, and partly melted into the earth turning it into a hardly passable mud. Additionally, there was a fine drizzle, which made wet clothing look like tin because of the falling temperature. There was no doubt that this chaotic blaring came from some men. When this happened, my mother and I were still at home. At first, my mother went to the window. She then shouted, "Take a look at this! What does this mean? And during this storm!" We then saw a coach-and-four, and on which male and female persons were sitting. These were adults. They had several items with them: bunches, boxes, and other things. [86] We then caught sight of a group of four armed men headed by H. Rempel. This pervasive vulgar singing which the villagers heard came from the hoarse throats of these men. They sang the Russian song: [Russian Song title] (On the sea, on the waves, today here and tomorrow there). We recognized two families together with their half-grown children on the carriage. We identified Dietrich Janzen and (probably Peter) Löwen from Michailowka, as the coach passed our window.

Then we understood that the same fate had befallen them. They had been de-Kulakized (expropriated). The expression Kulak (Russian: fist) referred pejoratively to big farmers in Imperial Russia. Dekulakization, thus, means expropriation. These families were now deported, expelled. The group of riders accompanied them to the train station Grischino. There, several families were put into a freight wagon to be transported to the north, where the majority of people then perished. It was impossible to return from these concentration camps, which were mainly situated in the swamps of the deep forests. We have often heard about the fate of these unfortunates. However, we stood stock still seeing this on the very street of our previously peaceful village.

Mother, Elvira, and I looked at each other in silence. Mother then said, "If our father is lucky, and has not been caught, our fate will prove to be more tolerable." Indeed, the fate of my parents was more tolerable than that of deportees. But they also struggled to survive.

¹ In Karlsfeld. Karlsfeld, Stepnoye, Caucasus, Russia; 44.2916N, 44.4355E, Zelenaya Roshcha / Karlsfel'd, Stavropol Krai, Russia in 2021.

Four adults lived in a small room with four-by-four metres: my sister Tina with her female friend, father, and mother. It was impossible to find larger accommodations in Stalino-Rutschenkovo at this time. Additionally, salaries increasingly were stretched thin because food staples were rationed, and the rations did not cover my parents.

However, you cannot compare my parent's situation with that of these two families. One of their sons would save his life, as we learned later. According to this man's own account who was only a child at this time—I knew him during this time—a group of expropriated families were sent to the deep forests of the Northern Urals, transported there by sleigh over frozen ground. After spring thaw had begun, the entire ground beneath them turned out to be an endless swamp, where they could not find any help. Bogged down in the swamp, the birds pecked and ate at some of them as they were still alive even. One often heard about such things, and even more horrible things from the concentration camps.

When we later talked about these kinds of things, father became utterly silent, would leave with mother, and both became noticeably very serious.

[87] In 1931, my wife Katja and I left Nordheim, and moved to my brother Gerhard's in the Caucasus. In late autumn, my parents joined us, since my sister Tina, who could not adapt to new circumstances, also moved to the Caucasus. Meanwhile, my sister Elvira married and stayed at Nordheim. The reader can see "My Autobiography," about how we fought for survival together with my parents in the Caucasus during the first years. There are several pages describing the hardship of our struggle to just live.

My dear readers, you will understand after reading it why my parents returned from the Caucasus to my sister in Rutschenkovo in Ukraine. At this point, my sister Tina was settled in well, and seeing that she lived alone (she had not married), you cannot blame my parents for wanting to stay with her. Moreover, my sister Maria with her son Kolya, and my sister Sara with her two children, Stanislaw and Brunhilda arrived in Stalino-Rutschenkovo. My parents had now overcome all the difficulties for themselves and their children to their utmost. My sister Tina had obtained a very good, spacious apartment, where she and our parents could make themselves comfortable. We children found good jobs and had everything necessary. Of course, we had to learn to live economically and modestly, but there was nothing to complain about. Nobody had to pity us because we were all content. We all assumed that we were relatively healthy. How long would this peace last in our family?

Father's Cancer and Death

The word "cancer" alone is frightening. I remember when I was a child that there was a woman who hadn't been born in Nordheim, but lived in our village. I also remember how this poor woman was pitied. The word cancer (in the sense of the illness, not of the animal) is still associated with expressions such as 'incurable,' 'goner,' 'psychological and physiological suffering,' and others. It was 1934 when we obtained a letter from my sister Tina in which she informed us that father had cancer on his left nipple, shortly after my

parents had moved to Rutschenkovo from living with us in Karlsfeld. Obviously, this message was hard to believe, evoking dread and terror in us. It was almost beyond our comprehension. It was not long ago that father had been in our home in good shape and mood, so to speak. Should he now die?

I want to write about the illness in detail because the story of father's breast cancer is noteworthy, and the reason for its origin is unique.

[88] My father had cancer for four years and suffered physically from it until he died. However, the story of his cancer was as old as he was. To be more precise, the cancer was really 73 years, six months, and 14 days old. A midwife caused his cancer due to her ignorance on the day of his birth on 28 November. She did not "treat" (press) his left nipple properly at his birth by not applying pressure to them. A small neoplasm the size of a wheat grain had grown on this nipple over the years. No one cared about it, including his mother. In fact, father was the least interested in it. After he had married as a 25-year-old young man, his mother-in-law once saw his bare chest. My grandmother at this point was a trained and very experienced midwife. She was also knowledgeable about how to protect children. For this reason, she noticed the neoplasm on father's breast at first glance. She evaluated the neoplasm and advised father to have it surgically removed. Father did not take my grandmother's warning seriously, and he even joked about it. "If it is necessary, I will cut it away with my chisel!" "Then do that," my grandmother encouraged him. However, my father neither had an operation nor cut himself, and so we forgot about the neoplasm. Likewise, we did not expect an insidious cancer to start growing on the father's breast. Living with my sister Tina conditions for an operation would have been optimal. All his children felt safe near their father's bosom so that no one was aware of the parasite, which was active, developing, and feeding on his body, revealing itself at the right moment to ambush, break, and kill this strong man.

That the cancer was triumphing was discovered accidentally. In 1934 when my parents returned with Tina from the Caucasus where we lived, my father was optimistic. He believed that the worst was behind him. We had all settled down, and we were glad that we had survived. Father had begun to scratch his chest often to relieve an annoying itch, until my sister Tina asked him, what was making him scratch so frequently. She then looked at father's chest, noticed red spots, and took him to the doctor for whom she worked as a surgical nurse. When the doctor, called Aleksandrov, had examined my father, he turned pale, then he looked first at my father, and then at Tina. He said, "What have you done to us? We have given you medical attention. We have known you for many years. Why did not you contact us sooner? Why did not you come to us before? What about you, Yekaterina Ivanovna? Why didn't you push your father? Why didn't you bring him to us?"

My father asked him whether he had cancer. Aleksandrov avoided answering his question by assuring him that he would be treated with all available means. [89] The doctors fought the cancer with radiation treatments. They eradicated cancer on father's chest. However, the cancer reappeared under his arm. The doctors then eradicated the cancer under the arm. Then the cancer appeared on the elbow joint. Again, they believed that they eradicated the cancer but it just went from one spot to the next. As the cancer was growing on the cervical vertebrae, the doctors were forced to give up, because if they had

used radiation near the brain, it would have endangered its function, perhaps even provoking sudden death.

They asked Tina to come to the cancer hospital, where the doctor informed her that all resources known to modern medicine had been exhausted, and they were forced to let father die of cancer. My father was irradiated about two hundred times, but the doctors were not able to eradicate the cancer. Nevertheless, they were able to slow it down.

It was now 1938. Until then, my father always walked alone for 200 metres to the tram stop; after taking the tram, he walked another 300 metres to the hospital. He also walked home the same distance. He enjoyed doing this. He trusted science and the doctors' judgement, and he was eager live. My father did, indeed, love to live. He never lacked the determination to overcome difficulties in order to survive. Now he was exposed to reality after the doctors had given up. He then accepted reality: I have cancer. I have to die of it. How much time have I left? No one could answer this question with certainty.

He lost all hope of survival; then his vitality began to fade. If vitality is waning, both moral and physical strength will decrease. Father's strength declined from day to day. We prepared for father to become bedridden. Until now he had not suffered from very much pain, but then we noticed that my father had pain in his cervical spine. He felt that he was running out of air when he breathed.

Our apartment was three kilometres away from Tina's apartment. Sara, Katja and I took turns visiting him. One of us visited him every day. We had two reasons for this: we did not want to trouble him, and we wanted to give him a chance to be alone with each of us. While I was preparing for my visit on a relatively warm April day, I looked out the window, and didn't believe my eyes. Father was slowly approaching my house and was only 100 metres away. I said to Katja, "Look who is coming?" We looked at each other and understood each other immediately. [90] It was quite a while ago that father had last been in our apartment. It was too far away for him to walk here. We both were aware what father's action meant, even as father was already standing at the porch of our dooryard. Both of us came to meet him, greeted him, and wanted to express our astonishment.

My father anticipated what we wanted to say, "I know that you are surprised that I walked all this way. It was my last walk. I wanted to look for one last time at the beautiful nature of spring, coming from God. Now I am ready to die at your home. May I do that?" We both said at once, "Father, did you doubt us?" He replied, "No, I have never doubted you, but my request might have surprised you. We have a good place at Tina's apartment. There are three rooms for three persons. Everyone has their own room, so to speak. Tina has enough space, whereas you only possess one room for three persons." We settled him down, "That doesn't matter. We always have space for you and mother." He replied, "Then it is fine."

He looked out of the window where he could see not too far away the graveyard of the city on a wide meadow at the edge of the city. There was rarely a day on which no hearses passed by our house silently or accompanied by horns. We thought we knew about what father was pondering, and we wanted to comfort him by telling him that he would not die

soon.

He said to us, "My dear children, we should not lie to ourselves. We certainly do not know when any of us will leave forever. However, let us be realistic, I think that I am going to die soon." We then had a drink of tea. Katja somehow purchased an orange. We knew that my father liked to drink tea with an orange (it would instead be more appropriate to say citron). Drinking tea was good for father. The end of the day was approaching. Katja prepared a bed in our room, and father laid down there. He did not leave this bed again.

The next day, Tina brought my mother to us. We placed father's bed in front of the window towards the veranda. We opened the window widely so that my father had fresh air, and we had space around the bed.

After that day, my father had two doses of cocaine each day to numb his pain. He barely ate anything. My mother only rested at night and sometimes during the day when I took care of father. There was always someone by father's side, either me, Katja, my sister Sara, or my sister Tina, so he could always speak with someone. Father remained conscious until his death.

During the entire month of May, father became weaker and weaker. Breathing became increasingly shallow, but he could still speak, and remained conscious. Mother was with him all day. Only if father slept for a short time, mother lay down on her cot beside father's bed. We often heard mother singing a song to him very softly when father felt better. Mother always chose the right song from her repertoire since she knew a large number of songs from memory. She was also aware of my father's favourites, and she knew the songs my father used to sing himself.

[91] One night, when I was alone with my father, I noticed that my father was no longer looking at the Bible he always carried. I asked him if I should read him something from the Bible. He asked me if I had a Bible. I replied, "Yes, I have a Bible." He said, "Do not read the Bible to me in the way you would read a storybook, which you want to read quickly to be finished with the descriptions of the characters. Likewise, I do not like the idea of reading the Bible aloud just to listen to it for many hours. I enjoyed reading the Bible on my own so that I could concentrate on each sentence. Many Bible readers ignore essential passages in the Bible, which are much more meaningful and significant than the parts they can easily understand. Several helpful books can support you in understanding and interpreting how the individual passages of the Bible are related to each other, and how they are connected. It doesn't necessarily help a lot to read the Bible a lot. What does help is what we draw from the Bible for ourselves." My father paused for a moment, and he then continued. "Speaking about myself, I learned by heart everything from the Bible that I need to be blessed."

In the last hours of his life, father received morphine every four hours, but this did not help him to get more air, or to be more precise, let more oxygen into his lungs (there were no oxygen pillows at that time). We often saw how he convulsed in pain. As mother asked him whether he had much pain, he replied, "I have received the chalice of death, and I endeavour to drink from it without complaint until I am done with it." My father

was very capable of that.

He never asked for anything personal. As I once asked him where he would like to be buried, he answered my question with a question, "What would you like to have for an answer?" I then asked him again whether he would like to be buried in Nordheim. He said, "I have no more wishes. My body will not care about where it will decay. Do what is good for you." He took my hands, and I had the impression that he tried to smile.

My father died on 10 June 1938. I had finished the last examinations for my students the day before, and so I stayed with my father all day. Sara and Tina also came in the morning because we expected that father would die in the next few hours. Father's voice had become soft, and he could hardly move. Sara came with her son, Stanislaw. He did exceptionally well in school. My father had said to him in Russian, "You will surely become a scholar. You will maybe find out how to beat cancer." He gathered his last strength and whispered, "You know where I am going to go, and you know how to go there." These were father's last words. He lay there peacefully while his breath became weaker and weaker. The clock struck 12. My mother shouted, "My dear husband." We were silent while we stood close to father's bed. However, we were all probably thinking the same thing: our beloved father and grandfather. Everything was silent except for my mother sobbing, and the clock ticking. Yes, time moved on.

[92] I then went by bike to my sister Liese in Nordheim (40-45 kilometres). Beforehand, we had decided that Hans Dueck would take a truck to transport my father's body to Nordheim, so that we could bury him in the Nordheim graveyard. Tina organized a coffin there while Sara and my mother prepared father's body and the coffin in the way that is prescribed by Mennonite tradition. Everyone got ready for the funeral in the apartment. It was already dark, as Hans Dueck and I returned to our apartment.

In Nordheim, several men had offered to dig the grave for my father. We placed father's body into the coffin, put the coffin on the truck, and drove to Nordheim. The coffin stood in Liese's room until it became bright. [*in the margin: We then put the coffin in front of the door under the lilac tree.*] My father's funeral took place on the afternoon of 11 June 1938. Several women gathered at the graveyard. Two former friends of my father, namely Uncle Spentst from Ebental and Uncle Ditz Klassen from Nordheim, appeared at the last moment. There was no singing or eulogy during the funeral. After the grave mound had been prepared, my mother prayed. A single verse that was written on a carton served as a sign for our farewell to our father.

God decided that you have to part from what you love the most. Even though nothing is harder to bear for the heart than parting. When father passed the cemetery on his escape from Nordheim seven years ago, he had wished to be buried there. We were glad we could do this for him. My father had never visited Nordheim again after his escape. I returned to my father's grave later in autumn. I framed the grave mound with a board frame, which was 25 cm high. On the top of the board was written with black letters: 28 November 1864—J.T.—10 June 1938¹.

¹ *Written in original: 18 $\frac{28}{XI}$ 64 J. T. 19 $\frac{10}{VI}$ 38*

This happened during the terrible time of Stalin's terror. Everyone knew that you could be arrested at any time. For this reason, Sara, Tina, Katja, and I went to the train station immediately after the funeral meal to go home. It was the same station from where my father left Nordheim for the last time. There were only four of us from this time on. Thus, I wrote down the following verses:

From this time on, we had a lovely little spot at home,
For which I am yearning.
On this spot, our hearts became sad, so we must comfort ourselves with tears.
On this spot, my cradle used to stand.
On this spot, the body of my beloved father now is resting.
My heart is longing for rest in vain. It always speaks to my inner self.
I am only looking at this spot, encircled by thorn hedges.

My mother stayed with my sister Liese and Hans Dueck in the village after father's funeral. My grandmother also passed away in the autumn of the same year (1938). She was buried next to my father's grave. My mother never returned to the city where we lived. My sister Tina married in 1939 and moved to Woronesch.

In 1939, my brother Gerhard returned from exile.

How My Parents Lived in Exile

[93] Father became more settled by the increasing awareness that his flight had saved him from death in the Siberian swamp and deep forests. The escape had made him overcome himself even though he had not fled entirely voluntarily. In so doing, my father had avoided what we would have had to suffer from a pitiful life in exile.

After father's flight, he arrived at Tina's home. He only calmed down a little bit. Then my mother came and told him about his friends, and fellow sufferers, D. Janzen and P. Löwen. She had seen a group of armed riders headed by H. Rempel deport them with their families despite bad weather, tempest, rain and snowfall, frost and excrements. Upon hearing my mother's account, my father became very serious, but later composed himself and felt better. He was always cautious when leaving the house. Sara came to our parents with her two children when she left her husband, Leo Kasanky, and Moscow forever. That was a hard time.

At this point, grocery stores allocated most food to persons who were on the lists. The amount of food to which the customers were entitled was fixed on cards. In addition, people had to stand in lines for several hours to get their ration. Tina, her friend Olga Deg, and Sara never found enough time to do this. Moreover, we needed to find heating fuel—coal and wood—and accommodation. We also had to work a lot. Father was in charge of this work. Doing this helped to distract him from his worries about his exile; however, he couldn't find peace at night. Any small noise woke him up so that he was awake for several hours, afraid that the KGB might find and arrest him. And the KGB might go against Tina and Sara. Tina was aware of her father's worries.

Memories of His Homeland

However, Tina once returned home and said to my father, “Father, you can now calm down. No one will harm you. That issue is fixed.” How did this happen?

Tina had gained a high reputation among the doctors, and local administrators in her job because she devoted herself selflessly to the recovery of ill miners, and all other patients. Yekaterina Ivanovna was well known and popular in the entire area. The local militia (local Soviet police) also knew her because she was currently in charge of their first aid training.

One day, Tina took courage to make an appointment with the head of the KGB. She then reported anything about her parents, and her siblings that might have been interesting for the KGB. She asked if they would arrest her father now because they knew where he was. The KGB officer didn’t interrupt my sister while she talked to him. [94] He just looked at her and said, “We know who you are, and we already know that your father and your mother live with you. If we wanted to arrest your father, we would have done it. However, you are safe now because you have decided to honestly tell us everything about your family. Nothing happens here without my permission. I will think about your case and inform you later. You can go back to your family now.”

She never made use of her conversation with the KGB. As she heard back from them later, they only informed her that her parents should be reassured, and work in peace since they had nothing to worry about. Thereafter our parents became increasingly untroubled, and father did everything within his power to improve all our lives.

Our parents always lived together with one of their children. We were always able to share with them everything that we had so that they did not suffer from hunger or other ills. We were unable, however, to prevent them ageing while they were in exile. Because they lived among their children, my parents avoided depression, or being overwhelmed by the worry that saps moral strength. They reinforced a certain degree of optimism by watching us. They saw that their children were coping well with the chaotic world of human relations, and the vortex of turbulent events. They also noticed that their children tried to maintain moral integrity despite tribulations and temptations, and that they managed to overcome horrible situations. We kept ourselves above water, and were able to succeed in life by our genuine physical and mental dedication. My parents saw how their children gained their reputations, and the trust of people in authority without buckling under them. Our parents saw that their children, free from arrest, enjoyed stability, unlike my sister Maria and Hans Neufeld, and my brothers Peter and Gerhard.

My parents maintained their vitality until father’s cancer. As a result, my parents’ and our lives suddenly changed for the worse. From 1934 on, not only father, but all of us were worried about his cancer. Such uncertainty burdened us more each day. When we came to Tina’s place and noticed that our father was increasingly losing interest in our visits, I asked mother where father went, and what he did. She replied that he enjoyed sitting alone for hours, that he needed solitude with God to cope with his situation, and that he still had many questions to ponder. She added, “Your father surely is not taking this easily. He is aware that he will die soon.”

Once I entered father's room, sat very close to him, and asked, "My father, are you not willing to reveal what is torturing you? Answer my question, please! We will understand you, and that will make you feel better."

Father replied, "Well, son, then listen carefully." He asked me whether I still remembered the Mennonite history which Gerhard Neufeld had taught me at school, and about which I had read in the book "The History of Mennonites in Russia" written by P. Friesen¹. I answered, "I have forgotten many things about it, indeed. I am unable to immerse myself in history in these tumultuous times. Additionally, there isn't enough available literature on this topic. And it would be risky to have such literature at home in our present circumstances."

Father said, "That is not my point. I can understand your concern. However, one day you will become interested in our history, just as I am at this moment. For my part, I do not possess the strength to ignore the past actions of my Mennonite brothers, and the things they neglected to do without becoming confused. Who were we? What was our problem? Why are Mennonites condemned to be wanderers and fugitives? Why were we not popular? Are we as hard-working as we think we are? Do we overestimate ourselves? What did our small people do wrong so that we are forced to remain in Russia until we perish? I ponder many questions. I found answers to some of these questions. But no one can tell me whether I am right or wrong. That is why I feel uncertain. There are so many things I have to deal with."

My father was often silent. However, he sometimes answered some of his own questions. "We thought that we needed to distinguish ourselves like other small peoples who live among large nations. We wanted to be better than them. We did not ask if we were capable, or if the others were as bad as we thought they were. We not only overestimated our abilities but also were arrogant towards people who thought differently from us. We did not care about them, and actually looked down on them. We were not grateful to those who gave us a home. We did not help those who were disadvantaged having so little. We have not kept our contract with Russia, thereby breaking our own word. Did we forget the articles of our faith? Did we actually live according to our own creed? We had some good opinions and institutions, but some things we could have done better. We not only accepted things that were contrary to our articles of faith, but joined in doing them. We sometimes even ignored our faith to the point of absurdity, thereby losing our credibility. Probably our main concern was to maintain our own prosperity. Likewise, we treated our servants unfairly. How much can we be criticized in this respect?"

My father continued, "In my opinion, we also did not do enough for the Czarist administration. Considering that we were exempt from military service, we could have helped the families who were affected by this. How much more could we have done?"

¹ This is probably a reference to *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789–1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911) by Peter M. Friesen. This has been translated as *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, 1978).

How much more should we have done? We were not generous with our neighbours—even stingy. No doubt, many among us Mennonites were stingy. My son, you have experienced it yourself. Remember our experiences during the First World War, when we were still living among our fellow Mennonites. We were just eager to increase our wealth; however, it is difficult to be wealthy, and simultaneously Christian. In this way, we did not think it was a problem that we Mennonites owned one hundred hectares of land or more, while our native Russian neighbours struggled to get two or three hectares. The Russians had just cause to be envious, and hostile toward us. We were just thinking about ourselves. We were selfish, and rarely even altruistic. We had enough resources to build our own schools, and employ our own teachers. All our children learned at least reading, writing, arithmetic and some geography at our schools, if not much more. The Russians weren't able to do this. We could have helped them in this regard."

I asked father whether he believed that he was responsible for all the wrongs of the Mennonites.

My father thought about my question for a moment. He replied that he believed in personal rather than collective responsibility before God. "Everyone has to account for their own sins before God at some point. I would certainly be lost if I had to declare all my sins before God, and atone for them to the extent that I deserve. However, I have already repented a lot in my current state of loneliness, and I am going to continue to do that. I hope that God will forgive me for some of the wrongs I have done. We are only blessed by His mercy. To repeat myself, everyone will be personally responsible according to what they have received. I am now suffering for my wrongs. I received more than others. I served our congregation for more than 25 years. I am responsible for what was done, and what was not done in our village, and religious community alike. During my term as administrator, I oftentimes didn't do enough, was too lenient with my opponents, and was not always consistent in my actions. I was part of the Mennonite community for 50 years. I loved my community, but I was too negligent even as I noticed how the community was increasingly eroded. Whenever I was unable to get my way, I simply gave up despite my beliefs and convictions. That was a mistake. Instead, I should have been a role model. Others would then have followed my example. Now I think that our community life did not lead to a true Christian life. Your mother and I spent many blessed hours together during our solitude. Living in a community can prevent you from being blessed, and can serve as a disguise for corruption. On the other hand, living together with others, including God, can make you strong. As it is stated in the New Testament: where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them. Many things in the Bible are understood in different ways or even misunderstood. People draw wrong conclusions from the Bible for practical life because of misinterpretation. While they talk about beliefs, their actions do not reflect their faith, even contradict it. Think about what you believe, and act upon your fundamental principles. Judge everything, and follow the good, as it is written. You will still experience struggle with many things, and you will observe, and evaluate much throughout your life. Be attentive and critical whenever you are not sure about something. Do not judge too quickly what you have not carefully examined beforehand. The most important thing is that you refrain from judging someone because you are not entitled to be their judge. For that, we have no right."

If we were discussing issues related to the family, father would stop speaking at some point to give the conversation a new direction. My father once said, “David, you are my youngest son, and you might be able to stay with us until my end. I know that I do not have much time left. I have revealed many things that I did not tell your brother. I am even going to share more with you. Your brothers are now far away from us. You are very different from each other. I don’t know what you experienced when you were living together at home. But now everything is fine.”

I had the impression he still had something to say, something which was bothering him. He then added, “However, your mother will probably spend more time with you.” I remained curious.

Mother told me that my father made peace with everything because she noticed that he completely relaxed. In this way, he died in full consciousness. I think I am lucky that I witnessed until his last moments how my father died. But it seems to me that there was still something that my father would have liked to reveal to me. Did he order my mother to tell the secret to me?

My father was buried in the earth of his homeland. My mother lived another eight years as a widow.

Our Deportation to Siberia

On 21 June 1941, the war between Germany and Russian began. Before harvest was over, all German men over the age of 15 years had to enlist in the Labour Army to help at the frontline, unless they were very old. Only women, children, and old men could stay at home. Politically, there was a depressing atmosphere at that time.

Meanwhile, the war was hot. The Soviet army suffered great losses, and the German army, which was stronger at this point, forced the Soviets to retreat to inner Russia. The Soviet government decreed that all Germans living in the European regions of the Soviet Union had to immigrate to the Asian regions: Siberia, Urals, the Far East and Central Asia up to the Iranian and Afghan border. They wanted the Germans to spread among the different ethnic groups living in these vast territories. You can read what happened to me, my wife, and my son in “My Autobiography”.

[98] On 6 October, all Germans from our Mennonite village were loaded into train carriages at the train station. You were able to hear the roaring of the artillery from far away. You knew that the war’s front line was coming closer. Women, children, and old men gathered along the empty tracks with all kinds of luggage. People were crowded together in the open. Children were crying as the women were sobbing or wailing, “What will happen to us? Where will they transport us to?”

After they had spent a cold and dark night, empty box cars were brought. The following order was given, “Form a group of 50-60 persons. Then load the luggage into the car, and,” finally, “sit on the luggage.” The luggage piled up to 1.5 metres or more deep in the cars. There were no heaters, toilets or lights. Moreover, there were no containers for water. You

had to use your own dishes and supply yourself with food. The next command was, "Please, make yourself comfortable." Then the trains moved off.

No one had any idea where we were going. My mother, my sister Liese together with her two children, my sister-in-law Maria, Gerhard's wife, together with her four children, my parents-in-law, and 35 other persons, who were not family, were together in the box car. We lacked the absolute essentials for this kind of travel because people only had two days to prepare. We forgot several necessities, including lightning devices and jerries¹. We had no experience! And now a terrible time was ahead! Alas, what misery!

Dear readers, imagine people stacked their luggage up so high that the space between the luggage and the ceiling of the carriage was only one and a half metres at the most. No one could stand up in the box car. We had no ladder to climb up. Young folk might have let themselves down from the pile of luggage when the train stopped, not at a train station but in the middle of the steppe far from any residential area. However, the elderly couldn't. So, they sat this way day and night on top of the luggage pile while wrapped in bed-sheets. It was impossible for them to lie down at the same time since there wasn't enough space. They were able to eat while sitting, or lying down, but how were the elderly and youngsters to go to the lavatory. Dear readers, try to imagine how it must have smelled in the box car. Where should they have put the excrement when the train did not stop for hours?

We travelled in the train carriage for more than a month. People were forced to live the entire time in an atmosphere characterized by the smell of human excrement and vomit. It was impossible to stay healthy under those circumstances. Many were sick. Where could the ill go? Sometimes children, elderly people, or women stopped breathing. It wasn't possible to bury them immediately. People argued about whether they should throw the dead off the train through the sliding door of the carriage during the journey. But they corpses remained in the same car with the living until there was opportunity to bury them hastily beside the tracks. There was often traffic congestion on the rails during our deportation to the Volga because the trains were overloaded. Halting the train had both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, we were able to ventilate the carriage, but on the other hand, our journey, which was already too long, took even longer because of these interruptions. But what could we have done about it? We just had to accept everything that happened to us.

The train was forced to change its route on the way because of hostile airplane attacks. Six or seven box cars were destroyed as a result of one bombing. The attack took place as we were in the open countryside. 35 people died; about 50 wounded. The dead were buried hastily, while ambulances took away the wounded. No one knew where they were being taken. We never found out whether those wounded had survived, or if they had ever managed to be reunited with their families. The things that remained undestroyed in the attacked cars were loaded onto the intact ones, so things got confused. Many people could not find their own belongings anymore. There were also many things whose owners we could no longer find because they had died, or had been wounded and taken to unknown places. Luckily, our carriage remained undamaged except for a dented ceiling. Mother

¹ A jerry is a portable container for elimination, i.e. a chamber pot.

suffered a head injury when she was lying on the luggage pile. She probably would not have survived if she had been sitting on it. We tended to my mother's injury ourselves. We were unwilling to leave her alone. The journey continued eastwards after they repaired the train, and loaded the remaining things and people onto the cars.

We crossed the Volga near the city of Kuybyshev¹. The engine and staff was changed there. Our journey had lasted ten days so far. Most people could hardly recognize themselves because their faces were unrecognizable being coated with soot and dirt from being illuminated by the self-made fat lamps (containers with a wick in fat). The deported were allowed to wash near the railway yard in Kuybyshev.

The Soviets now promised that the journey would become calmer since the war had not yet crossed east of the Volga. The train could travel without interference, so the journey continued. At first glance, the journey on this part of the route was calmer, indeed. Nevertheless, unrest arose among the people in the cars because our train, running without interruptions, rarely took breaks when we were not even allowed to leave the cars. Furthermore, we could, and were only allowed to open the sliding door a bit. Therefore, living in the box car became pure torture. My dear readers, believe me, it is impossible to describe how we lived and what happened to us in those box cars. Use your own imagination! You will find it hard to imagine the horror we went through. [*in the margin*: Our trains continued at a monotonous pace for several days without taking a break after we crossed the Ural Mountains. Therefore, we were not able to refresh our water supplies or to empty our jerry, if we had one. We were forced to breathe in the vapours of excrements and vomit so that many children and elderly people collapsed. If someone died, we would force the bodies out of the narrow slot in the sliding door.]

[100] Beasts could not have survived what we had to go through. To add to these hardships, we were exposed to cold weather since we were now in the Siberian territories. The cold wind was everywhere since it did not face any obstacle. The wind rustled through the train cars and made hissing and howling noises. It searched for every crack between the walls of the old wooden cars, no matter how tiny they were, to freeze the people who sat inside.

Our train finally arrived in the Altai Mountains.² (The Altai is a flat agricultural area stretching from east to west and from south to north, and so it was situated between Novosibirsk, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Omsk. The capital of this region was Barnaul.) Winter had begun. An area of hundreds of kilometers was covered with a layer of snow 30-50 cm thick. You could have only noticed the villages if you had stood on the roads leading to them. Everything was covered with snow. Our train cars were divided dropping one to two cars at several larger stations located along the railway from Tatachkaya to Kulunda in the south (the distance was about 250-300 kilometres). The destination of ours and two other cars was Slavgorod³. Our cars stopped in an empty field about two kilometres away from the train station, and we had to leave the train. Our trip had ended on the 28th of

¹ Kuybyshev from 1935 to 1991. In 2021 Samara on the Volga River.

² They didn't actually reach the Altai Mountains, but the Kazakhstan plateau to the north.

³ Slavgorod is at 52°59'N 78°40'E. near 150km SW of Novosibirsk.

November. We suffered from the most terrible living conditions for 36 days on that train. What relief as the sliding door opened completely! But then we became afraid of the layer of snow, 20-25 cm high. As far as we could see, the entire ground was covered with snow. More and more large, thick snowflakes were falling from the sky so that the earth increasingly turned white. We were left with our few belongings in the snow. What could we have done? We were ordered to unload, and leave the carriages within one hour. It could be no longer because the train didn't stand on a siding but on the main track. We had halted in an open field two kilometres away from Slavgorod.

We needed a fire and looked for anything to burn. But we didn't want to light an exposed fire in the open steppe. We dismantled a wooden box in order to begin the fire. Someone had a hatchet to hand. In the meantime, someone else came up with the idea of dismantling the railway ties. We covered the damage we caused to the ties with snow and packed it down with our feet. We proceeded in this manner so that we soon had some fires going. The elderly and the children were immediately set around the fire, the snow already melting away. We had a hot "tea" which helped us. All of us were washing with the soft, fresh snow. In so doing, we increased the blood flow to our veins so that our tired bodies warmed up again.

We began to sing in a soft voice, "If clouds make the sky dull to you" [*Machen Wolken dir den Himmel trübe*], "Throw away worries and pains" [*Werfe Sorgen und Schmerzen*], and other songs. I had the impression that mother mumbled to herself, "The winter can threaten as much as he wants, but spring will begin at some point."

[101] We, and the other families, spent several hours in the snow close to a small pile of our belongings, now also covered with snow. It was impossible to separate the elderly people, now wrapped in sheets, from their belongings sitting next to them. They kept silent with bowed heads. Their silence indicated that they were thinking about how much they would have preferred to die at home in peace instead of freezing to death in this Siberian ice desert. Likewise, the children were freezing. In fact, everyone was freezing. The Soviet administration wasn't interested in how they treated the deported Germans.

On the third day only snow flurries fell. The air became clearer, but the frost became harder. The entire group of people, which was mainly female, kept moving all the time. Some formed a circle while they tapped with the toe cap of one shoe on the heel piece of the other to make their frozen toes move. Others wandered over the snow-covered tracks, stamping their feet to prevent them from freezing.

Suddenly they caught sight of black spots approaching slowly, moving through the loose snow. They gradually saw that they were sleigh teams. In the beginning, there were only a few, but then there were more and more sleigh teams. These sleighs came from the kolkhozes. The Siberians were ordered to bring us—the Southerners as they called us from the beginning—to their home villages where they had to provide us lodging. We did not know much about the various villages that the carters mentioned, or how they were named. It wasn't the right time for such questions or explanations. Everyone was eager to get on a sleigh as quickly as possible and to throw their belongings on, and so the German newcomers dispersed. Many of the carters were not Germans, and they brought people to

two, three or four families who lived in different villages, and had different ethnic backgrounds. The deported Germans often hardly understood the native language, if at all. However, the Soviet officials could claim that they had accommodated the Germans. In this way, the communists demonstrated once again that a long evolutionary process was unnecessary to transform European into Asians. They caused this transformation by force and revolutionary means so that it would go more quickly and smoothly. “What Tsar Nikolai failed to achieve in many years, we communists brought about in five weeks. This is the way things are done now!” That might soothe themselves, but not their victims.

My mother, my sister Liese, Katja and I, our parents-in-law and some other German families were brought to an impoverished German village. It was formerly called Wiesental, but its new name was Stepnoye¹. It is firmly stamped into the memories of our siblings’ families. I will continue with my mother’s fate.

[102] Mother stayed with my sister Liese in the village that was called Stepnoye in Russian, and Wiesental in German. The German families did not have much time to move into their assigned accommodation, and to register. All women under the age of 50 who were not caring for small children, had to enlist in the Labour Army (Trudarmiya) for an unspecified period. Hundreds of these unhappy women starved to death in the Siberian forests because they were absolutely unable to adapt to the new circumstances. Countless women were sexually abused, and forced into destitution. Other women became pregnant and brought home children whose fathers were unknown. How often did these young women cry? How often did they suffer from fear? How often did these helpless people experience various forms of violence? How many family tragedies occurred because of the suffering of female victims, and their terrible situations? We will never know how many youthful hopes had died.

I also had to enlist in the slave army for a second time. I was allowed to quit the army in the end of April in 1945. (Read about my experiences at this time in “My Autobiography”).

Some men who had almost starved to death, and were considered incapable of working any longer as slaves, were returned to their families. Hans Dyck, the husband of my sister Liesa, and my brother Gerhard were among these men. When I returned to my family, they already lived in a different village called Gnadenheim (Russian Redkaja Dubrawa²) in 1945. At that time, I had an enriching conversation with my beloved old mother for the last time, thanks to fate or, to say it differently, God’s providence. Consequently, I call the next section of the text:

The Last Statement of My Mother Before Her Death

My mother said several times, “If we hadn’t had this conversation, I would not have fulfilled the promise that I made to your father before he died.” If it hadn’t occurred, I

¹ In 2021 Stepnoye Ozero, Altai Krai, Russia. 52°46’52”N 79°50’58”E.

² In 2021 Redkaya Dubrava, Altai Krai, Russia. 53°16’N 79°02’E

would never have found out about a family secret I had been speculating about for many years without resolution. I never dared ask my parents to reveal it. Whenever I tried to speak about it, by accident or on purpose, both father and mother would change the topic so that I became more confused than I had been beforehand.

When I returned to my family from my slave labour, I found them in terrible living conditions. There was no food at home, and the family had five members: Katja, our two sons who were fourteen and two years old, and her parents. I was exhausted. My eyesight had worsened, and I was tired from the journey. Another problem was that Skepnoye, where my mother lived with Hans and Liese, was about 20 kilometres away. [103] At this point, I was not able to walk such a long distance.

Now if one of her children were not at home, but somewhere out in the world, my mother would always utter a thing like, “A letter of Gerhard is going to arrive soon,” or, “David will probably come soon.” “Who knows what happened to Sarah or Tina? I have seen them in my dreams.” My mother had an astonishing sense of the future.

I had already decided when I would visit my mother when I received a letter from my sister Liese informing me that my mother was waiting for me! On the day that I came, true to form, she had been preparing herself to see me and speak to me. My beloved little paralyzed mother immediately limped to me when I opened the front door. What a joy! My mother said that Liese and her husband Hans were at work and would be away for a while. We would now have time and opportunity for a long conversation.

Without delay, my mother asked me if I had ever thought about my father's relationship with his siblings, especially his only brother and his children, whose only uncle was my father.

At first, I said that I had never understood why we had such a cold relationship with uncle Peter and his family. I still remembered how he had continued to smoke even though he was lying in bed sick and coughing. Whenever Elvira and I were allowed to play together at my aunt Maria's home—we enjoyed holding each other hands back then—my aunt was always very nice to us. She enjoyed talking to us and giving us walnuts. My uncle Peter had died, and aunt Maria shortly after him. I can hardly remember them¹. We used to have big photo albums containing pictures of various people whom I barely knew, or didn't know at all. My father and mother had friends all over the world, but the photo albums did not include any picture of my father's siblings. Why not? We knew that father had one brother, and two sisters, Maria and Katharina. His sisters never visited us. Only once, in 1928, my father had force himself to travel to Siberia where Katharina had lived for several decades. (He could do this because the economic situation had improved under the Soviet New Economic Policy.) He had once received a letter from her so that he knew her address. At that point Katharina had been a widow for a long time with several sons who were financially well off. His sister and her family were hospitable to my father, and told him about their life. You would have expected that this visit would have established a more consistent contact to bring together

¹ David was only a toddler at the time of Peter and Maria's deaths.

the different branches of the family to a certain degree. Yet, I cannot remember my father achieving this despite all his efforts. We never did hear back from my aunt's family after his visit. All memories that had been evoked had faded away.

[104] Let us now turn to uncle Peter's four daughters. There was Maria, who was a good-hearted girl at the age of our Sara or Maria. She sometimes visited and met my sister Maria and my brother Peter. I have vivid memories of her. The reason for this is that I liked her because she reminded me of her lovely mother, my aunt Maria. The other sister was called Neta. She was a little bit younger than Maria. Everyone was surprised that Neta was completely different from her older sister Maria being so forward and nasty. She was capable of making everyone look bad by saying rude things. It was difficult to tolerate her. Indeed, it was nearly impossible to accept her manner.

I remember an incident that made me confused when I was ten years old. It happened during the hard time of revolution and civil war. Maria's husband was a tall man, whose nice little daughter was together with me at school, being taught by teacher Neufeld. (I write a moving account about this girl in "My Autobiography".) Her husband passed away, leaving the four girls alone without any male support. It was difficult for them to do all the necessary work on the farm. Therefore, my father decided to help them because we had male servants on our farm at that time. He advised them and supported them practically. How was my father treated in his brother's house? Neta scolded him with the most vulgar insults, accusing him of incredibly ridiculous things, and forbidding him to interfere in her "affairs"—whatever that meant. I still have vivid images of father returning home after visiting his nieces. My mother followed my father to the corner room. They had an intense conversation from which I clearly understood that my father would never visit his brother's farm again. He did not as far as I know. My mother asked him: "How about the other girls?" I heard that father answered her question as follows: "They kept silent. Either they agreed with Neta, or they did not dare to say anything against her."

The goodhearted Maria died of pneumonia. The splinter of a bomb fatally injured Neta when we were deported to Siberia in 1941. I witnessed her being hastily buried with other bodies in a bomb crater. Besides Neta and Maria, there were two other young girls: Anna and Katharina. They were as old as my brother Gerhard and my sister Liese. They were both fine persons. I sang with them later in a choir for several years. Gerhard and Liese were also eager to have a close relationship with them.

I said to mother that I did not have the impression that she and my father had done much to bring our family together with uncle Peter's. However, I also noticed that both branches of the family never fueled their conflicts. The girls were neither hostile nor friendly to us. Rather, we treated each other with indifference.

I then said to mother that I always assumed that we were distanced because uncle Peter's family were members of the Church Mennonites ¹ [*kirchlichen*

¹ Mennonite Brethren members after 1860 began to refer to the members of the Mennonite Church of Russia as *Kirchliche* and their congregations as *Kirchen-Gemeinden*. This term implied that they worshipped in a church building (*Kirche*), while

Mennonitengemeinde, i.e., Kirchliche Mennoniten]. [105] When my mother and my father converted to the Mennonite Brethren [*Brüdergemeinde*], a conflict began between the brothers. The differences between the two branches of the family increased when my uncle Peter's children joined the Church Mennonites, whereas my siblings Anna, Maria, Hans and Maria became members of the Mennonite Brethren. Likewise, the foundation of the Mennonite Brethren led to a split between the Mennonites that was not entirely peaceful. There was always an ongoing tension between the two Mennonite movements.

Mother listened to me carefully, but then said, "Everything that you have said is true. However, the real reason for the distance between our families is something else. The fact that we joined the Mennonite Brethren only added to the tension. The original reason is much more significant." Mother then continued, "David, do you know that I have lately feared that I would not be able to keep the promise I made to your father? I wanted to keep the secret as long as possible. However, it is now time. I will soon go to your father. How could I meet him again if I do not fulfill my promise?"

"Listen to me! You are our youngest, and now an adult, and a father, too. Your father and I did not want you to be negatively affected by the truth as long as you were living among our own people. The story goes as follows. Peter Toews, after whom your father was named, had three children with his wife Maria (Dueck): Peter, Maria, and Katharina. He then died and left his wife with three children. It then happened that your grandmother gave birth to a child¹. But she alone knew who the father was. No member of grandmother's family ever met this man, including your own father. Your father said that no one in the family had ever mentioned to him that he was only a half-brother to the other siblings. They did not speak about it openly. His mother only revealed the secret to him before her death. At this time, Peter promised that he would allow his half-brother Johann to live with him until he would grow up, a promise that he kept. Nevertheless, your father sensed a certain distance from his brother while growing up, even though both brothers always aligned with each other. Your father was not a "real" Toews after all. His father was an Imperial German [*i.e. a citizen of the German Empire*], who had business in Russia. He suddenly appeared, then disappeared from your grandmother's life. He never became her legal husband. Your father and his brother immigrated to the Mennonite settlement [*Memrik*] where no one knew the truth. It needs to be acknowledged that your uncle's family was discreet with your father's secret. Your uncle's children certainly did not know it, otherwise Neta would have surely mentioned it. For this, your father was very thankful. [106] People were sometimes astonished about how different Peter and Johann Toews were. They not only looked different, but also had very different characters, and ways of thinking and acting. But there had always been peace between their families."

"When your father immigrated to the village as a seventeen-year-old young man, he belonged to his brother's family until we married. Your father said that he had not felt welcomed anymore in his brother's family after he had decided to marry. For this reason,

the Mennonite Brethren met originally in private homes and later in a *Versammlungshaus* (meetinghouse), which was not spoken of as a church. In this translation the term 'Church Mennonites' is used to differentiate this group from the Mennonite Brethren.

¹ That is, Johann Peter Toews.

your father was eager to become independent from his brother.”

“We did not talk much about your father’s family in our own family because we did not want to arouse any interest in the details of this affair. We wanted to delay this conversation as long as possible. However, you are now an adult. You, our youngest son, also now have life experience. You have experienced that the devil is always keen to observe people so that he can seduce them whenever they are weak, distracted, or careless. Humans always need to be on the watch. They can never be inattentive.”

Then I asked mother whether she had intended to accuse or damn my grandmother with this information. My mother replied, “No, we are not allowed to judge others. However, your grandmother was not able to provide her child with a comfortable life.” I asked my mother another question, “Mother, would you have preferred that father had never been born? Didn’t father’s fateful birth take the happiness from your marriage?” Mother said, “Do not worry about this, my son. Your father was honest with me when we decided to get married. We both were aware of it. I could not blame your father for what had happened to him. Oh no, his secret did not prevent me from marrying him. We were very happy.”

I noticed that my mother could hardly hold back her tears, so I comforted her. “Mother, forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you.”

My mother immediately composed herself, and I continued, “Did father not work with and for his brother for ten years when they founded your Mennonite settlement?” (The settlement was founded in 1880, and they married in 1890.) “You often said to us that you had built the small house on grandfather Neufeld’s farmstead within one month. I can somehow understand why my father did not build the small house on his brother’s farmstead, although he could have expected that his brother would offer this to him after he had worked for his brother’s benefit for ten years. I know the reason for this was that father and grandfather planned to produce carriages together. Father was in charge of woodworking, and my grandfather was responsible for the ironwork. The way they did it makes sense to me. However, I do not understand why father had to borrow one-hundred rubles to build the house—you often said that was the price of it—and that he had to conceal his debt from grandfather. Why? Did father earn, then waste one-hundred rubles while he was living with his brother?” My mother answered, “Without doubt, he earned that much money. But you know...”

[107] I noticed that my mother was looking for the appropriate words, and I said, “You don’t need to say more, mother, I now understand everything. It also makes sense to me why father no longer wanted to live together with his brother as he used to before he thought about getting married.” That was the story of my poor father.

We heard the door opening. Hans and Liese had come home earlier than planned. Mother finally said that my father had taken the opportunity to discuss things with me about which he had not been able to talk with his other sons because Peter and Gerhard had been far away from home during their exile. She added that I had already had time to think about these issues, that some things might become clearer to me because I would now understand them from a different angle. Things were past, having happened a long time ago. It didn’t

make sense to search for people who had harmed my father and us, because of any wrongs they had done toward us. She said that we were all sinners, and we lacked the glory we could give to God with thanksgiving. She felt free from her burden, and she was now able to die in peace. I could understand things better from now on, and use my knowledge wisely. I replied, "Thank you very much, my mother."

The whole family was together again: Hans Dueck, Liese, and my mother. We had not seen each other for nearly four years. How much had happened during this time! We had to talk a lot about our slave labour, and how our family made it through this challenging time. I intended to go back to my home the next day. I said goodbye to my beloved little mother. This was the last conversation that I had with her about affairs of our family. My mother was in good spirits when I left her. I, however, left the house with a heavy burden since I needed to walk for five to six hours to get home. This gave me the opportunity to ponder the surprising things that I had heard.

A few days later, I received a letter from my mother. I will summarize the contents of the letter.

My dear son, I could not say to you everything that I wanted during our last meeting because we were interrupted. There is still one thing that your father and I often discussed. I am going to reveal this to you, and then you can act, as you wish. You know that your father was always interested in moving to Germany. He did not like the idea of immigrating to Canada. He ignored the fact that he could have easily emigrated to Germany by way of Canada. But by then it was too late. Your father was enthusiastic about Germany. If you want to remain German, you will need to immigrate to Germany. We might be able to become more prosperous in America quicker than in Germany; however, we will only be able to preserve our German identity in Germany in the long run.

Germans become Russians in Russia, and Englishmen and American in Canada. [108] They would then cease to be real Europeans. The October Revolution triggered the assimilation of Germans into Russia. However, a similar process would take place in Canada and other countries, although it might be slower in liberal societies than in Russia. Furthermore, Germans would rather assimilate into a foreign country than into the motherland. That would be inevitable if they were living in a foreign country among other ethnic groups. This does not mean that becoming these (non-German) ethnicities are worse, or less valuable than German, however, they become different Germans, since they do not possess the German nature or spirit. Those who do not care about the things that maintain the German nationality can choose to go, and live wherever they want. They might even become wealthy thanks to this decision.

Likewise, Mennonite are different in each country. Mennonite groups develop differently in various times and places. They might transform, degenerate, or dissolve into another confession. The economic/material conditions also change in line with the political agenda of the host country. Germans do not necessarily shape these changes in the different ethnic groups, or governments. The Germans will always remain a relatively small ethnic group in this country, and the Mennonites will even be a much smaller community. For this reason, they will always have to adapt and adjust to the situation in their respective

country.

The various factors that I have mentioned will only be in a Germany shaped by Germans, even though there might be some influences from different countries, or in other words, some “borrowings.” The German Mennonites went to Russia to continue to be Mennonites. Yet they ceased to be Mennonites. They wanted to become and remain wealthy in Russia. They did so, but eventually became extremely poor. Several countries, in which small ethnic groups such as the Germans, or autonomous religious groups settled, limited, oppressed, persecuted, or displaced them whenever they changed their constitution or government. People then began to flee on their own, or in groups wherever they were allowed to live and stay. Who has experienced this more often than Mennonites? The reason is that they secluded themselves from the dominant ethnic group. They became strangers among the people in their homeland, and, at one point, were exiled because they were unable to make compromises, and adjust themselves to the mainstream. However, the Mennonites were only treated in this violent way for their gradual dissolution.

By contrast, the Germans will always remain German in Germany. They will move forward and develop further together with all other Germans. It might sometimes happen that not all Germans are happy about changes at first. But they will remain Germans at least, because Germany will not cease to exist. I wanted to remain German, a German among Germans, and I wanted my children also to remain German and live among Germans. Your father failed to create the preconditions for this. He realized that he had not fought consistently enough to achieve this. Your father assumed that God had punished him because of his failure, and he bitterly repented of his sin. He believed that God had forgiven him for his negligence, but he bore his punishment with dignity until he died.

[109] Mother’s last letter ends, “My dear son, those were the last things which I needed to reveal to you to fulfill my promise to your father. Take father’s words seriously, even though you do things differently as your father suggested. I am convinced that his principles were right. You might be able to immigrate to Germany some time. If your father were able to find out, he would smile at you from his grave.”

This was my last conversation with my mother. I had then sensed how much my father had wished to go to Germany. The reason for this is not that he did not like non-German people. By contrast, my father had many Gypsy, Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian, Greek, and Armenian friends. We hosted everyone who needed shelter. But he felt a strong connection and attachment to Germany. What is wrong about this? I always hoped that we would succeed in immigrating to Germany. I never gave up on this. For this purpose, I stuck to Tertullian’s (160 AD—200 AD) words: The end sometimes justifies the means.

I finally moved to Germany 44 years after my father’s death and 33 years after my mother’s death. We succeeded in emigrating from Russia to the Federal Republic of Germany with the help of my nephew Heinrich Toews, and his wife Margaret, despite many obstacles. We arrived on the 24 May 1979 at Frankfurt Airport. Our wish came true. My wife and I became German citizens by naturalization, and received our official certificate of citizenship on 28 November 1981, my father’s birthday. That was wonderful!

Memories of His Homeland

According to a decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, we lost our Soviet citizenship on 17 August 1982. We are now legal Germans! O my father! My dear mother and father, our and your wish has come true for your son David, and your daughter-in-law Katharina. Please, do not assume that we achieved it on our own. Rather, we think that we have just fulfilled our duty. We could do this because God answered our prayers and yours, my dear parents!

The most terrible time for us Southerners, as they used to call us in Siberia, was during our detention was from 1945 to 1955, after World War II. My mother struggled to cope with these hard years. She gradually became weaker; however, she did not lose her cognitive abilities until she got typhus in 1946. My mother had to go to a hospital where she received good treatment. When my brother Gerhard and I visited her in the hospital in Halbstadt where we both worked, she could no longer recognize us. My mother passed away on 10 March. Immediate family only attended her funeral. My mother's grave was located in the graveyard of the small village, Stepnoye. The village was dissolved about a year after my mother's death. First, weeds began to grow on the graveyard, and then it became a field. Therefore, the graves of my parents, my father's grave in Ukraine and my mother's grave in Siberia were lost.

Our beloved parents are disappeared from the earth forever. My father lived for 73 years, 6 months, and 11 days, and my mother lived for 77 years, 6 months, and 2 days.

Epilogue

[110] I have always appreciated my father for his loyalty to the principles of his faith.

He was positive about Mennonites because of their industriousness, practical skills, caring parenting, and their strict married life. He liked the life of the Mennonite church community. However, he did not consider the traditional, almost obligatory participation in the community as the only way to serve God. For him, serving God meant primarily to obey His will in daily life. He appreciated the family church service, and also the silent and solitary devotion "in God's beautiful nature" as he used to call it. If you are in nature, God's mighty and wonderful creation will often be more appealing and convincing to you than if you are accustomed to appearing in places of assembly on time, possibly listening to unqualified sermons.

In general, my father did not put much emphasis on ritualized church service procedures such as weddings, funerals or even baptisms. For this reason, he thought that the split between the Mennonite Brethren and the Church Mennonites did not make sense. The Mennonites split into a superior and an inferior part because the Mennonite Brethren considered themselves better than the Church Mennonites. This mindset made the former blind so that their ethics, and naïve genuine faith in Jesus degenerated, while the latter stagnated, and did not increase their wisdom because they were less spurred on to be righteous. The unity of the Mennonites collapsed, and mistrust replaced mutual support. The common zeal of the Mennonites to become full believers was hampered. Therefore, the Russian people and government gradually lost their trust in the true Mennonite faith.

My father thought that the Mennonites had never really understood the principle of nonresistance. However, they soon knew how they could benefit economically from their insistence on non-resistance or pacifism, even if the protection of their home country diminished or even completely dissolved due to their prosperity. In this way, the Mennonites sold their sense of loyalty to their homeland and patriotism. Finally, they were only able to immigrate to countries that did not ask Mennonites to do anything for them. They immigrated to every country that allowed them to become wealthier for their own sake. Father had no such attitude towards a country at all. He despised that Mennonites strived after worldly wealth that resulted from violations of contracts. He believed that such behaviour contradicted Christian values.

My father was a firm believer in science and education. However, science should not downplay or even contradict faith in God. He enjoyed observing nature, humans, their behaviour, and relationships with each other.

He was very generous and philanthropic. He loved all humans, regardless of their ethnicity, or confession, as long as they were honest and open-minded. He was capable of discussing their opinions and convictions with his interlocutors for many hours without getting angry. He hated hypocrisy, sanctimony, and fanaticism. He carefully avoided extreme positions since he believed in moderation. He appreciated the “golden rule.”

[111] In the first place, my father’s practical obligation was to take care of his family, and to make sure that he and his whole family had a home where every member was welcomed. He worked towards this goal. Father wasn’t interested in wealth for the sake of wealth. Rather, he wanted to achieve a form of collective prosperity to which the members of the family could contribute according to their means and talents so they would feel entitled to continue to use the wealth of the family when they wanted to build their own home. They could draw from the family’s wealth any time, even if they decided to pursue their own interests. My father’s house should serve as a place where his children could come together again so that they could enjoy, renew, and strengthen their sense of community.

Father was especially concerned about his sense of obligation and integrity when he had to fulfill his duties. He was strongly interested in singing, music, the recitation of poetry, and the reading of good books in order to learn something for life.

To speak about my father’s religious beliefs, father thought that if you believe in God’s justice, you should not assume that your mishaps and ills are a result of misfortune. Instead, you should understand them as His warnings or punishments for careless or sinful misconduct. In this way God encourages us to change our behaviour. If we have failures, we should blame ourselves for them rather than unjustly blame other people. If you quickly accuse someone of causing your failure, and you begin to look for the wrongdoer until you have found him, you will be more likely to take revenge. No man is allowed to take revenge, or even seek it. My father used to say at proper occasions, “The Lords says, “Vengeance, and recompense belong to me.””

We often heard my parents singing together the following song, *Richte Nicht Mit*

*Harter Strengel*¹:

1. Do not judge with harsh severity, when you experience others' wrongdoings.
You are not free from the vices that are coercing you.
It is the Christian's duty to be gentle. Do not judge your neighbour!
2. Are you always aware of the reasons for your fellow men's actions?
Do they really commit a sin, or do you just assume that?
Is your judgment justified, or are you driven by your own passions?
3. Be careful even if you have really suffered from the sin of others,
Otherwise, you will sin with your invectives, scorn, and bitterness.
Be humane and forgive the sin of others!
4. Be a Christian, and give sinners your hand! Let them be happy!
Direct them towards the right path with your kindness, if you can!
Be careful, if you are free from sins, not also to become a sinner.

I do not claim that I entirely agree with the message of this song. Nevertheless, such songs helped our ancestors to create and to maintain harmony among themselves and with the people around them. That was precisely the main principles of the belief of our Mennonite forefathers. It is another question as to how much harmony they were able to maintain.

Our Beloved, Little Mother

[112] Oh how much my mother cared about her children! She gave birth to twelve children. She raised ten of them; two of them died suddenly after birth. She still got to know all her grandchildren, except Anna's three children, and Hans' three children², because they were born in America. Without doubt, she was primarily concerned with her children's wellbeing. She knew everything about the children. She used to say, "All my children are different; therefore, I need to treat them differently." My mother developed a strong anticipatory sense for each of her children because she knew them so well. She was always eager to stay informed about their material situation, and how they might feel mentally about their lives in all the different situations in which they were involved.

She said, for example, "A letter from Sara is going to arrive today, or something from Tina since I have the feeling that something has happened in her life." Her predictions indeed came true most of the time. She then said, "Have I not said so before? I saw them last night." Or she would say, "It is just intuition. I do not know the reason."

¹ Do Not Judge with Harsh Severity

² David's brother, Hans (Johann) and Justina adopted Mary, birthed 2 children in Russia, and 3 more in Canada.

Whenever one of her children came home from somewhere for a visit, my mother would grin from ear to ear. On these occasions, she was even able to forget about the crutch she almost always held. She then limped to us as fast as possible so that she could greet us. My little, lame mother was that loving!

If her children were in difficulty, she would immediately comfort them. She had a maxim for every situation. "Winter can bring bad weather to us as he likes, but spring will come eventually." My mother was also well read in the Bible so she could always say something comforting and encouraging to us.

My mother never gave up. And how much pain had she suffered in her life? She had difficulty walking since her childhood. She had also broken her crooked leg in the knee three times. Moreover, she had bad eyes as long as I knew her. My mother had to spend several hours, and days in a dark room. In later life she had a strange toothache, and some parts of her tooth were removed. My mother suffered from chronic rheumatism her entire life. How happy my mother was when my father was able to purchase a bottle of liniment. She always had to rub, oil, or massage something.

Nevertheless, she was always busy, never sitting down without something to do. She was stuffing, mending, sewing, cooking, kneading dough, or reading the large house Bible. We often heard her singing as she worked. She could recite many verses by heart. My mother enjoyed listening to her children when they were doing their homework. She always knew what was going on at school. Women from the village would come to mother when they wanted to sew something for their children (shirts, trousers or blouses). They asked my mother to cut the material. [113] As far as we children can remember, my mother (sometimes together with my grandmother) always dressed the corpses (both children or adults) for their funerals, decorated and nailed the coffin according to Mennonite rituals. For this reason, mother always carried in readiness some scissors, a small hammer, and other necessary items in her bag. Whenever a child got sick in our village, mother was immediately informed when the child's mother noticed it. My beloved mother was very knowledgeable about how to treat children. Grandmother had taught her a lot about that. In that remote time, there were few doctors available, and few women had gained medical experience, or read books on the subject. Mother always knew how to help those who needed it. She had ointments for wounds or ulcers, potions for stomach issues, herbal transdermal patches, and so forth. Furthermore, she always knew some helpful advice. It frequently occurred that brides before their marriage, or new, young wives came to mother to ask for advice about their future lives.

Mother was modest as she cared for all her children, and my father. She had many wishes for her family, but she hardly wished anything for herself. Indeed, she did have some wishes, but secret ones.

In 1945, the Soviet Labour Army with which I was stationed was in the Siberian village of Gnadenheim¹. When I was allowed to end my service in order to return to my family, my mother wanted me to visit her immediately when she heard. The reason for her wish

¹ Gnadenheim was in the Redkaja Dubrava district of Altai Krai, USSR.

Memories of His Homeland

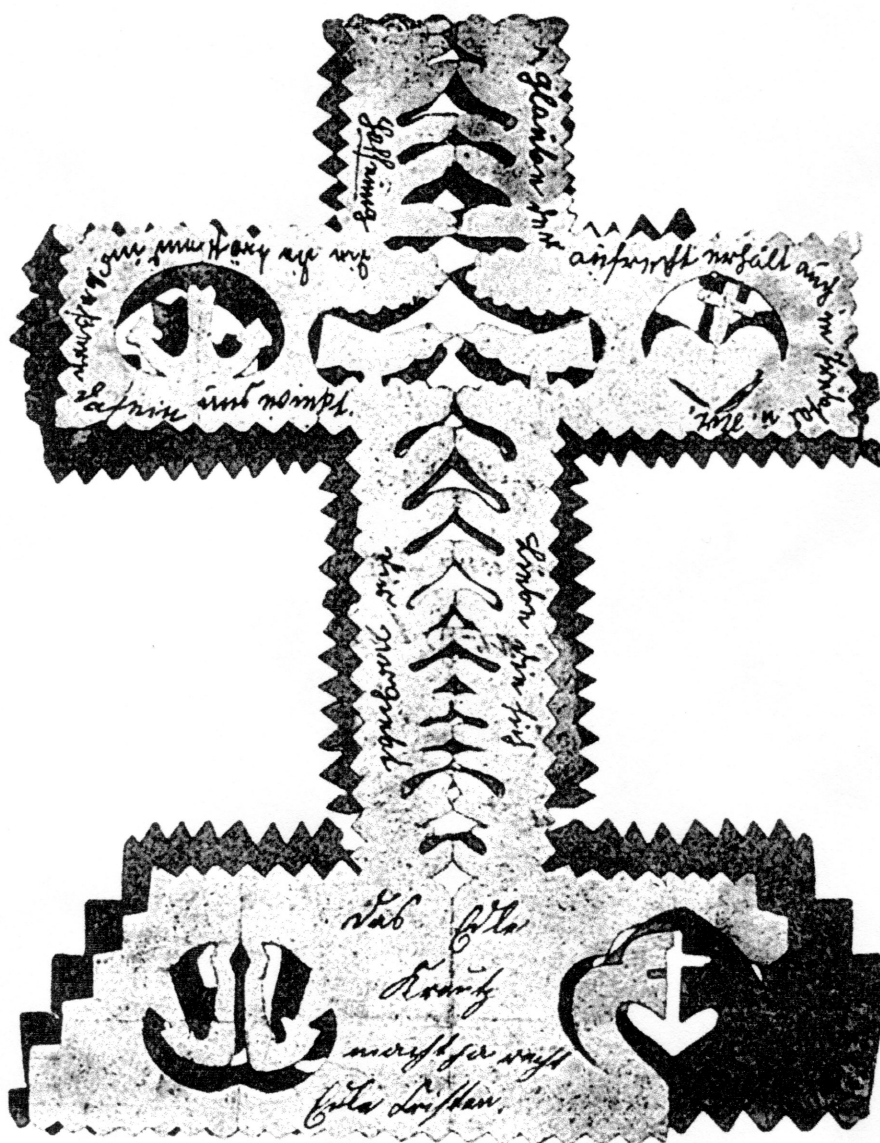
was that she was very afraid that she would die before she could reveal my father's wishes to me as he had asked. My mother was very nervous when we said hello, but then she calmed down, and we hugged each other until she started our conversation. I received a letter from her after our conversation. My mother got typhus soon afterward and died.

Alas, my dear mother! You related to me everything that my father wanted to say to me. The village no longer exists where my mother was buried. It was called Stepnoye (Wiesenfeld). The inhabitants of this village had to resettle, and the entire area of the graveyard became a field. We will never be able to find my mother's grave again.

Father's grave is very far away from my mother's. It is located in our home village, Nordheim. We children or other members of our family will probably never be able to visit their graves. Your living children and those of us, who have already been buried somewhere, are very sad about this. However, we cannot change our fate.

[The following pages are photos of papers inserted into the manuscript. They are all by David's mother, Anna, and have not been translated. The second is a piece of devotional *Scherenschnitte*, or paper cutting. The third and fourth are the front and back of one sheet.]

[illegible]



[illegible]

[illegible]

PART ONE—CHAPTER 7

MEMORIES OF MY SIBLINGS

ANNA

[115] My sister Anna was our parents' first child, born on 7 May 1891 in Nordheim (Marynivka). We frequently heard my father saying that he was very happy that his first child was a daughter. Father wanted to have support for my mother who had difficulty walking. Why was she named Anna, the same name as my mother? She needed to be prepared for taking on the role of the firstborn for my parents, being the oldest for her younger siblings. I don't know much about how Anna lived together with her younger siblings, and there were plenty of them. However, for her youngest siblings, my sister Elvira and me, she was a mother-like caretaker, equal to my parents in terms of authority. She was an important figure for us. Her appearance, her stature, her size, her glance, her movements made us admire her, while her behaviour evoked our respect. She was strict, distanced, and she made us aware of her intellectual superiority. In short, Anna was a true firstborn.

During my childhood, Anna attended a deaconess school. She was a long-awaited guest when she returned home for the semester break. Her school was far away in the Molotschna Colony. Our entire house got prepared for her visit. She arrived by train. We picked her up with the spring carriage from the Zhelanaya station. We left home in time so that we could experience how her train would arrive. My father or brother Peter wanted to, and should meet her at the platform as she was exiting the passenger car lest she had to wait for them in the waiting room. At home we impatiently waited, a little nervous for the arrival of the vehicle in which our guest would arrive. When we knew that she would come soon, the entire family would welcome her at the yard which we younger siblings had swept beforehand. Indeed, our parents were excited about Anna's visit, and we, siblings, were proud of her. We loved Anna, and she appreciated this.

In Muntau, where she received professional training, Anna got acquainted with Hans Ediger, whom she decided to marry. According to Mennonite custom, the wedding was performed at the bride's home; we had it in our barn. Presumably, the wedding took place in 1913. I remember this wedding vividly. I can still hear how my father said, "We have

consumed a sack of 00 flour already.” These were 80 kilograms of flour; however, that was normal for a Mennonite wedding. Obviously, we also had spam and apple sauce.

After the wedding, the young couple went to Hans Ediger’s home in the Molotschna Colony. I am not certain about whether Hans’ parents were still alive at that time. I do not think so. In 1914, the First World War began, and Hans Ediger was drafted to serve as a corpsman on a hospital train. Anna came back to our house. [116] From the day of her return onwards, our calm house seemed to be characterized by a distressing atmosphere. We assumed that it dismayed Anna because Hans had to leave her due to the war. This made sense to all of us in the house. However, many people had to leave home back then. That’s just the case in a country during the time of war. At that time, many people around us suffered from the same fate, and indeed we all felt sorry for Anna. In particular, my parents tried to comfort her. Nevertheless, my sister became more dissatisfied and resentful every day.

Gerhard and Liese, my older siblings, were able to escape the wrath of the firstborn skillfully. They sneaked into the summer room to do their homework. It usually belonged to us youngest siblings. That meant we had to go to our dining room where we could play our funny childhood games without bothering anyone. However, the ill-tempered Anna, who lived with us, was annoyed that we were cheerfully playing in the dining room located in the middle of our house. My sister exhorted us both to play less, and we followed her order since we respected Anna.

Seemingly, we had already turned Anna against us; therefore, we only had to misbehave a little bit to make her angry. One day, as we both played in the dining room as usual, we were cheering at too high a pitch for Anna’s ears. As we jumped over the broom with which Anna was sweeping the floor, she got mad at us. She boxed my ears and cheeks at once, and she hit my sister’s butt with the broomstick. She took both of us with her hands to lay us down on the washing basket that stood at the entrance of the room in a dark corner. We heard how she uttered to us, “Be quiet! Not a word.” Something then happened that Anna had not expected. The door to my father’s office, which was behind her, opened with a jerk, and we heard father speaking no less harshly than Anna. “What is going on here? Why are you so nervous? I think it would be good for you if you began to behave yourself again. You are not the only one who is suffering right now!” My father directed these words towards Anna. She calmed down. My father looked at us through his glasses for a second, and then shut the door.

We sat quietly while Anna went through another door into mother’s bedroom where she was sewing. We heard whining from there, and how my mother muttered the following words, “Anna, I gave birth to twelve children; however, I never got mad like you do when I took care of you. If you continue to lose your patience, and you want to have more than one child, Hans will leave you at some point after he comes home.” [117] Anna then opened the door, looked at us, and said, “You are now allowed to play again.” We jumped up. I was five years old. I understood my mother’s word and knew that Anna was expecting a child. I felt sorry for her. We both decided to play much quieter from that day.

One day, we ate lunch together, and we all sat at our usual places. When we were all busy with eating, my father suddenly glanced at the glass door, which led to the dark corridor and the sleeping rooms. We looked at him and noticed that he was smiling at the glass door, and he said to Anna, "Look!" Now we all stared at the glass door and whom did we see? It was Hans Ediger, Anna's husband, our brother-in-law. He stood in front of the glass door in the dark corridor, wearing a military uniform. He had been dismissed from service due to the pregnancy of his wife. He had walked to our house from the station (five kilometres), and had crept through the back door into our house, and was watching us sitting at the table. Anna immediately sprang from her stool and ran to the door. Hans had already opened the door, and embraced his beloved. Obviously, we stopped eating for a moment, but we then continued our lunch, having merry conversation, after my father had said a prayer to thank God.

One day later, Hans and Anna returned to the Molotschna Colony since Anna would soon give birth. After a short period, we obtained a letter from them with the following words, "We have a son who we have called Hänschen."¹

Occasionally, Anna visited her father's house alone, or with Hans, or she brought her little boy with her. One time there was a problem with him. It happened when Hänschen had already learned how to walk, and Anna visited us together with her sensitive boy. To repeat it, Hänschen was sensitive, and he was raised to strict, if not artificial, cleanliness. Unfortunately, on a farmstead it is impossible to avoid what hens, or even cows leave behind that can result in an unpleasant "catastrophe."

We three children played barefoot together in the garden in front of the main door, and then we suddenly heard a terrible yelling behind us. As we looked back to see what was going on, we caught sight of Hänschen, who put one of his feet in the air while he was shouting with all his might. He might have been stung, or he might have hit a stone. Without pause, his mother left the veranda, and began to scold us. However, we had not been even close to him. It was impossible that we were responsible for his mishap. We approached him from different angles. Elvira, my sister Anna, and I met where the whining boy was, and what did we see? Oh, my gosh! He had stepped into a pile a hen had left behind. And now he had the stuff between all the toes of one of his feet. His mother lamented, "Oh, my dear!" However, the more she lamented her small boy, the louder Hänschen cried. [118] At this point, Elvira and I were not able to hide our amusement anymore, and burst into laughter. The louder we laughed, the more sister Anna scolded us. We did what we could, running away, and we would have died laughing if Elvira had not fallen on her face in the loose garden soil. When she stood up, her mouth was full of dirt because her laughing mouth had been wide open. As a result, she began to yell as much as Hänschen. I now had a second reason to laugh, and threw myself on the ground noticing how terrible my sister looked. Elvira's mouth, nose and eyes were full of soil. Then my sister Liese came by, took Elvira, and brought her to the water trough that the cattle drank from, and removed the earth from all the hollows of her face. Speaking about myself, my mother made me stop laughing by her reproof. "It is not right to gloat over others' misfortune." Gradually we calmed down. However, we amused ourselves for a long time about Hänschen's

¹ "Little Hans"

misfortune, until a second “catastrophe” occurred, which was more impressive and significant than the episode with the chicken dirt. Hänschen was again the “hero” of the story. It happened as follows.

As usual, Elvira, Hänschen, and I were strolling in the house yard and garden on a sunny June day. We were playing, picking and eating gooseberries and strawberries, climbing up cherry or plum trees to find tree gum or something else. In this way, we didn’t notice that it would soon be lunchtime. At noon, the cattle used to return from the pasture to our house yard to drink because we did not have a river or pond close to the pasture. After the cattle had quenched their thirst with fresh well water from the water trough, they were taken away back to the road where the herders passed with other cattle.¹ Children had the responsibility of looking after the drinking cattle to prevent them from leaving the water trough in the yard and running into the gardens, keeping them moving back to the road. Furthermore, we had to make sure that the cattle did not touch the fences; otherwise, the beasts might destroy them. Lastly, the children had to make sure that the cattle did not soil the sidewalks lest shoes would be dirtied.

So, Elvira and I ran to the house yard as soon as the calls of the herders on the street got louder. Beforehand, Hänschen left us to go to his mother in the kitchen, but now we were late. The cattle had already quenched their thirst before our arrival and had had enough time to clear out their bowels. Now they were calmly standing still. Everyone who has had anything to do with cows knows what a pile of cow manure looks like. From a distance we saw that Anna stood in front of the door, watching the drinking cows. All of a sudden, we noticed terrible yelling, crying, and Anna wailing. What had happened? We both began to run as fast as possible. Had a cow hurt her boy? We hastened and soon saw what had happened. Anna arrived at the scene of the accident too late. She had not paid enough attention to Hänschen who had run into manure while he eagerly shooed away the calm cows with a stick. He had slipped so that he had fallen onto the pile with his whole body. First, he was lying with his front on the pile, but then we noticed how he turned over onto his back. As a result, he was covered with dirt from head to foot, including face and hands. [119] My sister Anna then grasped the barely visible boy with both hands and carried him in front of her. The boy fidgeted around with his hands and feet, and touched Anna’s clothes making them very dirty. Often in life, people can be quite lucky under unfortunate circumstances. Anna and Hänschen were lucky because a bathtub stood in front of the main door in a patch of the sunlight. Its water had been warmed by the sun. We were usually dabbling in the tub, but now it stood ready to fulfill the wishes of the boy and his attentive mother. Anna put the boy with his dirty clothes into the bathtub to rinse the grossest dirt off him. Meanwhile, water warmed on the stove. The bathtub was emptied, and brought into the bathroom where a longer cleaning procedure took place. The members of my family still had lunch on time, whereas Anna and her son needed to wait before they could eat. After having napped, we avoided speaking about this puzzling incident. Mother and father occasionally asked whether the boy might be unhappy for the rest of his life.

¹ Villages were laid out with farmsteads along a single wide street. Cattle were driven by a herdsman down the street to and from the communal pasture. When coming back, the animals would automatically enter their own farmyards.

Hans Ediger came to us by train shortly before the end of the Civil War in 1922. At that time there was a shortage of everything. He bought a wagon, horses, and everything that you needed for carting. He then loaded coal onto the wagon and bought flat oven plates. In addition, he put a caged sheep onto the wagon because the family needed wool for socks and gloves. Unfortunately, on the way home, the sheep shattered the cage and ran away. Hans failed to track it. The sheep had escaped.

A daughter was born to the Ediger family, a daughter called Anna, named after her mother and grandmother.

In 1923-1924, the Edigers immigrated to Canada, where they had two more children, one son (Walter) and one daughter (Hilda). Edigers struggled to settle in Canada for a long time since Hans died of heart failure, and Anna decided not to re-marry. It was not easy for my sister struggling to make her living, considering that she had four children. Despite these challenging circumstances, she managed to keep running her house, farm, fields, and everything else. She even founded and maintained a household above average size. She was successful because she was hard working, economical, and tough on herself. Furthermore, she guided her children towards punctuality and industriousness. Along with other valuable things, Anna had these characteristics from my parents. Anna was able to preserve and enlarge her heritage. She always succeeds in her endeavours. It is reasonable to assume that she transmitted her industriousness to her children. Her children should be grateful for this virtue they had inherited from their mother. Children who rejected their mother's gift would have longed for it for their entire life, but could only have blamed themselves.

[120] We siblings always admired and respected sister Anna because of her cordiality. Her children Hans, Walter, and Hilda got married while Anna was still living and able to experience numerous grandchildren. Anna's youngest¹ daughter did not marry. She dedicated most of her life to mission in India, and she lived with her sister Hilda from 1982 to 1983. There she died of cancer when she was about 65 or 67 years old.²

Our sister Anna got gradually weaker, mentally and physically. She spent the last five years of her life in a retirement home in Winnipeg. She enjoyed excellent care there. Her nurses were patient with her and took good care of her. She died at age 86 years. We, Anna's siblings, thank and honour her caregiving. God shall reward her. My oldest sibling, Anna, passed away calmly and world-worn, guided by God, in peace, my dear Anna.

In 1980, my wife and I got acquainted with our nephews Hans and Walter Ediger at their own homes, as we were visiting our relatives in Canada. Hilda also came to greet us. They all possess good and spacious houses, beautiful farmsteads, and well-equipped living rooms. They all have happy families with two or three children. They enjoy regular family

¹ The Ediger children were John (Hans) b. 1918, Walter (Walther) b. 1919, Anne (Anna) b. 1920, and Hilda b. 1924. David's inaccuracy on the births is probably due to the fact that the Edigers lived over 350km away from Nordheim in the Molotschna colony, probably in Muntau.

² Anne Ediger died in 1981 at age 61.

life and have everything they need. Furthermore, they all have jobs satisfying both material and spiritual needs. It was a great pleasure for us to meet them. Especially, we were very happy that Anna's children are still maintaining their German heritage. They demonstrated that by speaking German with their spouses. Furthermore, they were still able to write in German. Anna's children had kept the German language alive in their families, orally at least. In Canada, Germans frequently lost the ability to speak German, thereby degrading their German descendants.

A few words about Anna's children: Hans Ediger and his wife Katharina are well-off. They have three sons and one daughter. Hans has diabetes. That might be the reason why he tends to be melancholic. His wife, Katharina, is a well-tempered and industrious housekeeper. She made a good impression on us because of her charm and happiness.

Walter and his wife Esther are very gentle and hospitable people. They have one son and one daughter who have adopted the friendliness of their parents. In Walter's house, three generations live together in peace and harmony. They still speak German very often.

Hilda and her husband Johan Dueck¹ were well-off, too. Johan is a medical doctor who has his own practice. They have four children. Hilda and Johan can write German very well and enjoy singing. We were sad that we could not visit them, as we were in Canada, because they lived too far away from my brother Hans. However, Hilda and Johan are the only children of Anna who visited us during our stay in Canada. We are glad that we met Anna's children but we are sad that we were not able to meet Anna.

PETER

[121] My brother Peter was born on 22 September 1892 in Nordheim. My father was still a woodworker during Peter's childhood and schooldays. In fact, my father worked a lot because he wanted to fulfill the wishes of his customers, and was also eager to increase his income out of necessity. My brother Peter was hardly interested in my father's occupation so that he did not improve his future life by learning from father. So, he did not contribute to the building of our spacious home or the general wellbeing of my family. He did not support my father's work. At that time, my family still lived in a small house on my grandmother's farmstead. Furthermore, Peter did not show a particular interest in acquiring theoretical knowledge at school. The difficult circumstances back then prevented my parents from discovering Peter's inner needs and interests. If they had done so, they could have made him try out various activities and find a proper occupation.

At a time when I already knew many things, and was enthusiastic about everything that I was able to get into my hands, my father used to watch me while I was working. He often said, without explicitly mentioning Peter's name, "What one lacks, the other has in abundance. Within a family, parents sometimes fail to distribute human values equally

¹ John and Hilda Dick lived at Jordan, Ontario.

among their children, even though they are determined to educate their children in the same manner. Some children are able to succeed in life without much or no help at all. Other children show determination and understanding for something they want, but they lack the energy, resources, moral support or encouragement to begin with it. You can help these children to get on the right track, and enable them to move forward on their own. You even enjoy helping them because they will not misuse your help. In contrast, any help they receive—it does not matter whether it is material support or a piece of advice—will make them grow materially or spiritually. They will very likely become persons who are also willing to help others. It should work that way. But some young people are not interested in anything, have difficulty with everything, or refuse to learn from their experiences. Because of their ignorance, they hardly succeed in anything, so they rely on other people. They ignore the advice of reasonable people, or abuse the help of others, and also tend to blame others for their failure. It is very easy for these young people to frustrate their helpers, even their own parents or siblings. Younger siblings are sometimes jealous of other people's success, while blaming others for their bad situation. These young people are at risk of being involved in crime." My father then became silent. He looked away and ignored questions posed to him. It was easy to guess about whom my father was speaking.

When my mother witnessed the monologue of my father, she would indicate to us that it was a good time to change the subject.

[122] During his adolescence, Peter had to take care of the cattle and the stallion. My father drove out the heavily loaded dung cart, and took the water out of the 30-metre deep well thinking these tasks would be physically too strenuous for Peter. Despite these efforts, my parents could not help Peter to improve.

In contrast to Peter, Anna and Sara, were passionate learners. My sister Maria was always busy with painting or especially with handworks such as sewing, stitching, and crocheting. She was mentally strong, even though she was physically weak. My brother Hans was a dedicated learner, too. Peter then began to express the wish to become a miller, as he was noticing how his siblings were doing. Indeed, he would like to take care of a rolling mill as a miller. My parents believed Peter gradually felt that his siblings were overshadowing him and that he was left behind so that he began to ask himself what he could do later in life. After Peter had uttered his wish several times, my parents began to think about how they could eventually guide their oldest child towards the right path. Peter's wish was one of the reasons why my father decided to purchase the mill. However, my parents' hopes turned out to be futile in Borissovo where the mill had been purchased so that Peter could pursue his dream.

When I was four years old, I was allowed to visit Borissovo. I still remember how Peter played with us children—Jakob Dörksen, Jakob, Neta, and me—on the meadow. He came with an unfamiliar bicycle, and practiced riding it, also taking us on it. Neta Dörksen came across a snake and cried horribly. My brother Peter came, caught the snake (it was not a poisonous snake), and we played with it for a long time. At that time, he was nineteen or twenty years old. Back in those days, we enjoyed Peter playing with us. Later, I changed my mind about Peter's laziness. After the mill had burned down, Peter went home with a

carriage loaded with many household goods. I have already described what happened in the aftermath of the fire.

One day, the atmosphere in our house became very tense. I remember that my father was beating my brother Peter and my sister Maria severely. There were no excuses. Peter would soon become a father without having planned it.

In 1914, the war broke out. Peter was drafted to alternative service. However, he was soon allowed to leave the service because of a leg injury. He returned home on crutches. His painful wounds healed eventually thanks to our mother's care.

In 1915 or 1916, Peter married Anna Born. They spent the first months after their marriage in our summer room where her first daughter Anna was born. She was a very restless baby. It was easy to upset her. I felt obligated to dandle this restless child until she fell asleep because Peter and Anna were busy getting her home ready. [123] To be frank, I admit that I sometimes perceived this as a heavy burden. However, there was no escape for me. My sisters, Tina and Lisa, were also helping. Peter and Anna wanted to settle down in the old house that had once belonged to my grandmother. Since my grandmother had left the house, several people had lived there who did not care about its maintenance. Indeed, my brother Peter was lucky. He was provided with a house and farmstead without putting much effort into it. As a result of the post-revolutionary agrarian reform, he also obtained from my father the thirty hectares of land attached to the farmstead where my parents lived. No other sibling inherited or received as much from my parents as Peter. Obviously, the political circumstance in Russia at that time had contributed to his fortune. However, if you are wondering whether he was able to succeed, the answer is no. Peter always failed somehow. He went to the coal mine during winter months to earn additional income. There was not enough money. To be more precise, there was not enough of anything. His wife Anna, who weighed hundred kilograms or even more, was always busy with herself or the children. She had many children. They came one after the other. Anna's fertility was the only advantage Peter had over all his siblings. What about Peter's livestock? Horses, cattle, and calves? My brother Gerhard was not able to take care of them since he was always busy with studying, and was hardly at home. Meanwhile, my brother Hans served in the medical corps, and later he ran his own farm. I was the only one who was left. In the morning, Anna fed the animals, because I had to go to school, and had to help my father in our stable barn before class started. Fortunately, I was a good learner, God be thanked! I was attentive and active during the class, so I needed only an hour to do my homework. After that, I went to Peter's stable. Anyone who has ever dealt with livestock knows what I had to do there.¹ I have to admit that I was sometimes annoyed at having to help my brother all the time during my childhood. However, I do not regret any longer what I have achieved for my brother since I began to understand the consequences of the development of family later in life.

Peter had eight children; two of them died during childhood. He had four sons, Hans, Andreas, Peter and Heinrich, and two daughters, Anna and Olga.

¹ *In the margin:* For anyone who doesn't, the stables needed to be cleared of manure each day!

After the enforcement of collective farming, when his children were adults, Peter's family situation improved a little bit. The children were encouraged to work every day, and were paid according to their production. Peter fell prey to Stalin's Great Purge in 1937-1938, which had fatal consequences for his sons. During exile, my brother Peter also died. As the Second World War broke out in 1941, the three oldest sons and the two girls had to serve in the forced Labour Army. Peter's wife, Anna, stayed alone with her youngest son, Heinrich. I met this son in Siberia after the war. He was a woodworker in a factory in the Urals. *[written on the left margin: He belonged to a group of about 30 men that were arrested in our village in 1937/1938. Presumably, they were all shot.]* [124] The two girls survived and established their own families living in the Urals in the city of Nizhny Tagil¹. The girls were allowed to take their mother to their home. Anna was buried there too. The three older siblings did not return from their slave labour to their sisters and mother. They starved to death somewhere like thousands of our fellow Germans. The three other children of my brother Peter, Anna, Olga, and Heinrich enjoyed a relatively good life under Soviet circumstances. They all had children, and their children also had children. I do not know how many offspring they had. We had contact with our nephews until we immigrated to Germany. Anna, Peter's oldest child, spoke good German. She did not only speak well, but she was also able to write in German. She is already retired. *[written on a note inserted on this page: In the last couple of years, [nephew] Peter's children also immigrated to Germany. Heinrich suffers from brain weakness. The girls are older women. They do not have husbands. Their husbands have already passed away, or are divorced. However, they do have many children.]*

Peter's children were continuously urged to assimilate like tens of thousands other Germans in Russia. Peter's children are becoming increasingly assimilated, and his grandchildren are probably completely assimilated. As long as you have a German surname, you are considered to be a German descendant. However, if you get a Russian surname, your last trace of German ancestry disappears.

I have outlined my memories of Peter and his family here. I am going to add some thoughts to my narrative.

My siblings had been telling me over the last years that my brother Peter was very fastidious as a child. He was never satisfied with something. In particular, he was concerned about his clothing. I did not notice this character trait of Peter because he was unable to afford good clothing after I was born. As much as I could observe Peter's behaviour and practical skills, I think that my brother Peter suffered from a lack of determination. It was evident that he was eager to accumulate material wealth. But he was hardly interested in his own spiritual wellbeing. He did not have goals. He did not know what to do with himself. He was not interested in finding role models from whom he could learn, even refusing to learn from other people. He never read. He did not keep any books in his house. Indeed, he did not even possess a bookshelf. I also doubt that you could have found a Bible or hymnbook at his home. Without doubt, he did not have any booklet with songs, whatever content they might have. He rarely sang because he did not remember any

¹ In 2021 Nizhny Tagil (Нижний Тагил), Sverdlovsk Oblast, Russia 57°55'N 59°58'E.

text. He only sometimes hummed a melody. He did not play any instrument even though we had plenty of musical instruments at home. There were no instruments at his house. He did not want to acquire any practical skills. He only learned the essential things from my father. Likewise, he did not draw on the role models of prosperous farmers to learn how to cultivate his soil with farm animals, and how to make profit in order to honestly accumulate wealth through hard work, and overcoming difficulties. If you cannot do that, you probably will become envious, and develop negative thoughts. As a result of these thoughts, you might even be on the verge of committing crime. I don't think that my last thought about Peter is wrong. I am sorry. However, I never had a negative attitude towards Peter because he was my brother.

SARA

[125] My sister Sara was born in Nordheim on 28 February 1894. I do not know anything particular about her childhood or adolescence. I only vaguely remember she spent some time with Peter and Maria at the mill in Borissovo. During my childhood, she visited a middle school for girls somewhere, and then went to Central Asia to relatives of my mother by the name of Tielmann accompanied by uncle Eck. She worked as a private tutor in a Kyrgyzstan town called Pisppek [*written on the left margin*: The small town used to be called Frunse (nowadays Bishkek¹).] Sarah left our house at the onset of the First World War. At that time, we were not able to maintain contact with her. We could hardly exchange letters with her since there was only a single-track train connection to Tashkent back then. As the war increasingly became more intense, it also became more and more challenging to stay in contact with Sara. In the early years of the war, my sister did not want to return home because she somehow enjoyed life in Central Asia. After the Russian revolution had begun in 1917, she was no longer able to return home. At this point, the correspondence with her came to a complete standstill.

Several years later we received a letter from Moscow. My parents opened their letter with excitement and tears of joy in their eyes. My father was happy to recognize and reread Sara's beautiful handwriting. However, they put back the letter into the envelope with mixed feelings after reading it. My father became very serious, and my mother sat crying at the spinning wheel. The reason why Sara's letter made my parents sad was that she had married a Russian man in Moscow. In addition, she had not been able to find employment so far, although she hoped to get a new job soon. She sent an account of her life, how she had gone from Tashkent to Moscow, where she came to the house of her husband Leo Kasanky, and his family.

After Sarah had thought about it for a while, she decided to return home from Tashkent. Her sister Maria had left Central Asia earlier so that she could go home relatively easily in a healthy state. But Sara began to feel unwell sitting the carriage soon after the train left. She noticed that she felt weaker and weaker. However, she could not expect to receive

¹ Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan

medical support on the train, especially since she was travelling in the Asian part of Russia, so she suffered for several days huddled in the train. She woke up in hospital, and caught sight of an unknown man sitting beside her. This man, who had also been a passenger on her train, had brought her to the hospital after she fainted. He had stayed with her in the hospital for about ten days until she was recovered enough to resume travelling. The man continued to travel with her. They both headed towards Moscow. The travel was very strenuous for a long time. One day, this man asked her to marry him, and live together in his home city of Moscow. [126] He said that he was a young scholar who had had to finish work in Central Asia. He was returning to his siblings, who had employment in Moscow, and owned an apartment there. This is how Sara married, lived in Moscow, and would soon work there in an office.

My parents struggled to accept that Sara had married a Russian without informing them, or asking for their consent. They needed some time to digest her decision. My sister Sara never received my parents' approval for her choice. Sara's husband also never spoke with our parents or relatives about it. My parents could do nothing.

In 1923-1924, Sara gave birth to a son named Stanislaw. Until this point, my parents needed time to forgive Sara for her misdeed. They then asked Sara to visit them. My father always had a positive attitude towards Sara because of her thirst for knowledge, studiousness, and efficiency. He especially appreciated her exceptional beautiful handwriting. Nevertheless, she had hurt him. Under these circumstances, I got to know Sara on this visit. At that time, I was 14-16 years old.

Then Sara gave birth to a daughter whom she named Brunhilda. She always seemed a little strange to us because she had forgotten some of the etiquette of her parent's house, and she also exhibited some unusual behaviour. She only spoke Russian with her children, and she increasingly struggled to talk with her parents in her native tongue. Despite this, Sarah made a good impression on us. She was an intelligent and educated woman. Furthermore, she was ethical, polite and exhibited a caring and proper behaviour towards us. She visited us one or two times more with her children without causing any troubles. She was well-established in Moscow. Different governmental departments employed her as a secretary because she was punctual and accurate. She was also a good writer, and was proficient in Russian. Besides this, she was able to translate from German to Russian in an emergency. However, she was unable to translate from Russian to German.

Sara's husband was always busy with expeditions in the Russian-speaking world. His occupation had a negative impact on his marriage. Gradually she suspected him of cheating on her, and then found evidence of it. So, she left her husband and Moscow. At that time, my parents had already been expropriated, and lived at the house of my sister Tina in the city of Stalino¹ (it used to be called Yusovka). She moved there together with her two children. She found a job as a German teacher at a secondary school in Stalino where she worked until the Second World War. Sara's children were appropriately respectful as they met their grandparents and aunts. In this way the relationship between the members of our

¹ In 2021 Donetsk (Донецьк), Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine

family improved quickly, after my parents and Sara had accommodated and forgave each other.

[127] After I moved with my family to Stalino in 1935, we three siblings and our children enjoyed some wonderful days with our parents. Our parents changed their minds about many things that they had not previously accepted. In short, we all had learned. We lived in different parts of the city, had our own homes, but we often met at our parents' home, or one of ours.

In 1941, she was deported with her children, and other Germans to Siberia, to Karaganda in Kazakhstan, while we were deported to Slavgorod in the Altai region. We did not know anything about each other then. Brunhilda, Sara's daughter, became a nurse, Stanislaw an engineer. He was an exceptional student. After the war, he obtained two university degrees and was a scholar. In 1953, I visited him in the Frunse, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, where he worked as the representative of the department of food security. In contrast to his sister, who was a lovely and friendly person, Stanislav was serious, arrogant, and harsh. He was also a Russian nationalist, and hostile towards anything that was not Russian. I do not know where he is living now. I was unable to continue exchanging letters with him because of his absolutely refusal. Brunhilda suffered from lung disease, and died at a young age. As I visited Stanislaw, he told me that his mother had suffered a lot while he had been serving in Tashkent far away from the front line. His mother got sick when she lived in a kolkhoz on her own. She was struggling with her disease for a while before she passed away eventually without having received proper medical treatment, or sufficient food.

In this way I was never fully knowledgeable about Sara's life. In 1929 my family, together with many other Germans, were gathering around Moscow waiting for a long time for travel documents in the vain attempt to emigrate to Germany. We were then brought back to our home towns. At that time, I visited Sara, who was still living together with her family in the city of Wjasma, near Moscow. During my visit, Theo was at home, so that I had the opportunity to get to know him a little bit. Obviously, he was a highly educated man, but he seemed arrogant and full of himself. In contrast to his wife, he did not care much about other people's needs. We had difficulty building rapport. He only pursued his own interests, but he was excellent and proficient in his field so he always occupied high positions.

Sara was industrious and punctual as much as he, but she was also a friendly person so she gained recognition and respect from everyone she had met. She helped everyone who asked her for support. She was intelligent, polite and approachable so it was also easy to talk with her. She had many friends because of her openness. However, speaking about her inner life, she was never satisfied with her life because she did not achieve her own goals. She never talked about this openly because she never blamed anyone for her own failures. I felt sorry for her. I would have liked to spend my last days with her. My poor beloved sister!

MARIA

[128] My sister Maria was born in Nordheim on 13 October 1895. She suffered an accident during childhood: As she was swinging, the defective ropes of the swing broke. After one push, the seat and Maria fell on the hard ground. Grandmother's medical knowledge, and mother's careful massages prevented her from getting scoliosis. Later, she suffered from a lung disease from which she never completely recovered. She grew into a beautiful girl although she had a pale face. Without rosy cheeks Maria never looked healthy. It oftentimes happens that feeble children receive a lot of care, and indulgence for two reasons. They need more care, and people sympathize with these disadvantaged creatures. But this behaviour can have harmful consequences for these children in the long run. They can develop spiritual and moral weakness in addition to their bodily weakness. In such cases, the hereditary (genetic) characteristics of these children might be overlooked so that they unfold uncontrolled. For this reason, we did not notice that Maria suffered from erotomania¹. She was the only family member who had this condition. A most terrible thing happened to our family. My two siblings, Peter and Maria, had a child because of his carelessness and her feebleness. The child was a boy named after his great uncle Nikolai (nickname: Kolya). This man was married to my mother's sister, Ida. This sort of inbreeding brought harm to the innocent child having to bear the consequences of his parent's misdeed for sixty-six years until his death in 1980 (he was born in 1914 and died in 1980). Any evil deed causes a new evil. I think Schiller once wrote:

This is the curse of every evil deed
That, propagating still, it brings forth evil.²

Uncle Eck then came and brought my sister Maria to Kyrgyzstan. While my sister was helping Uncle Eck in his hospital in Kyrgyzstan, she once sent a small black hobbyhorse with wheels to her son. It was very well crafted of wood. Kolya then was two years old. Maria's gift showed me that she was Kolya's mother. However, it took a while until I was informed who Kolya's father was.

Maria returned home before the Russian October Revolution. Then classes for children who would have gone to the first grade were organized in secret because the German schools in Russia were closed until the beginning of the October Revolution. Children could at least learn how to read and write. My sister Maria was the teacher for a group of sixteen children between six and eight years old. I belonged to the group of the six-year-old school beginners. Pupils and their parents were very grateful for Maria's work. Indeed, she did an excellent job. This was 1916.

In 1922, Maria married Hans Neufeld, who had obtained a degree from a commercial school. He was an orphan. He adopted Kolya so that he now had the name:

¹ Psychiatric definition of erotomania: a delusion in which a person (typically a woman) believes that another person (typically of higher social status) is in love with them.

² Quote from Friedrich Schiller translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Nikolai Johan Neufeld. From 1922 to 1923, we suffered from famine. We also lacked clothing, shoes, and everything else. Gradually, the supplies had been consumed during the First World War, the Revolution, and the bad harvests. [129] Maria had a small wedding by her family. Apart from the family, the teacher Gerhard Neufeld and the pastor Daniel Siemens, who performed the wedding ceremony, attended the wedding. We had *prips* (roasted barley) and *kukukusschnetki*¹ made of cornmeal for dinner.

Hans and Maria moved to the small house that my parents had built for themselves thirty years before on grandmother's farmstead belonging to my brother Peter at that time. Maria had been born in that same small house, which was three metres wide and seven metres long.

Hans Neufeld's parents had lived in Molotschna. They had had two sons who experienced the early death of their parents. The oldest son lived with this uncle, a competent farmer. Unfortunately, he died there in an accident. As he was driving the seed drill with several runners, the horses were spooked so that he lost control. He fell off his seat (a stool) and under the runners that crushed his skull.

Hans, the younger son, physically weaker than his brother, began an apprenticeship. He was successful, and later attended the school for trade and business. In 1917, he obtained his degree during the revolution. The revolutionaries dressed the students of this school in uniforms, and forced them to be cadets (members of the Constitutional Democratic Party). One day when Hans Neufeld was freely walking around the city in his uniform, he was arrested, and condemned to be shot without trial or hearing. Now during the revolution, some groups of fighting revolutionaries did whatever they wanted to do. They deported Hans to the next town, called Grischin, in a carriage full of prisoners. At the entrance of the city, there was a steam mill that was under construction. They shot many victims of the revolution inside this steam mill. When the group of prisoners to which Hans belonged already stood against the wall, wearing only underwear, Hans managed to escape through an open window (thanks to the darkness of night). He walked bare-footed 22-25 kilometres through snow and swamps, only wearing underwear, until he reached the village Michailovska, where some of his relatives lived. He arrived at this family's home during the foggy night thereby escaping death, but the young man could not save his health. These events were too much for his nerves. He became shy and anxious for a long time. He had to leave his relatives soon because he did not possess legal documents. He very cautiously returned home, where his documents still were. He could start to work as a private tutor or as a teacher at a small school again since he was not prosecuted. At that time, he did not have a proper home anymore, and he rarely had enough to eat. He came to our home area by accident, and partially because he wanted to improve his situation. Then he somehow met my sister through friends of hers. In this way, he came to our house guided by providence, or by accident. We were happy to welcome the young man who had experienced so many bad things during his short life. We were certain that he was an honest person so that he would be grateful to us.

¹ A kind of baking powder biscuit

[130] The wedding of Maria and Hans took place in spring. At that time, nature seemed to be still angry with humans since so many innocent people had died as a result of the civil war, the misuse of power, and through injustice. Without doubt, nature was wrath, and planned to take revenge on the survivors. By not sharing its abundance with humanity, nature can best penalize them (Genesis 4:12). We had terrible harvests two years in a row. Some fields remained unsowed during spring, and those we had sown were not promising. This resulted in a very poor harvest. We lent our seed drill to the neighbouring village, while we were preparing the threshing floor in order to thresh out the little we had with our threshing stones. To proceed with the harvest in this way, we needed a lot of human labour. The new son-in-law had to help us.

Even though Hans was not meant to be a farmer, he tortured himself with exertion. As a result, he was continually hungry. During the threshing season, he learnt well how to use a winnowing machine. In the case it was not windy, Hans would have to start with winnowing at four in the morning for least the next three hours. He struggled to carry sacks that would slip from his shoulders onto his back thereby becoming twice as heavy. 'Fortunately,' there were not many sacks to carry. We only harvested enough grain to cover our most urgent needs. Hans was never able to learn how to harness horses in front of a carriage using a long harness. He simply could not understand this. In winter, Hans organized a small group of boys whom he wanted to prepare for middle school. Our brother-in-law taught six boys, I among them. To show how much I value my precious school-mates and friends, I will enumerate their names with a saddened heart, according to the way the desks they had in the classroom: Abram Unruh and Peter Hildebrand, David Cornies and Gerhard Rogalsky, Kornelius Klassen and me, and our teacher Gerhard Hans Neufeld. We became seven friends, and we did well.

At the end of the term, we prepared a small evening performance for our village. Hans taught us how to perform the poem "*Die vier Freunde*" [The Four Friends]. I can't remember the name of the author. We took different roles. I played the narrator; meanwhile, the roles of the four friends were played by David Cornies (the politician), Peter Hildebrand (the warrior), Kornelius Klassen (the scholar), and Gerhard Rogalsky (the theologian). Abram Unruh recited the poem "*Kolumbus*" [Columbus]. I still remember what I had to say as narrator. I will write down my verses.

The wind was rustling through the leaves, and the moon was shining on the bower
encircled by blossoming vines. Under the green plants, four young men sat
together, thinking about their farewell.
They had spent their youth with each other, and their hearts had enjoyed the
highest bliss that youth can grant.
But now they had to say goodbye, and they dissolved their friendships. Each of
them now walking his own path in the homeland.
The sense of duty, indeed, triumphed over their desire and longing. And yet tears
ran down the young men's faces.

One of the young men spoke, "Life is a dream, for sure. Yet, the context of the dream matters. [131] Life gives us space for finding our own path. We will succeed if we do the right things." The young friends then wished each other a good journey, and each took his

own path. As mentioned, they each chose a different profession. After forty years had passed, the young men, who had become friends in the moonlight, were still alive. They all were loyal to their friendship and their promise. They gathered on the same date at the same place. And the wind rustled through the leaves, and the moon shone on the bower encircled by blossoming vines. Under the green plants, four men sat together, pondering about serious things. In an intimate circle four blossoming young men had once sat together. However, youth had faded a long time ago, and now four old men sat together. And yet they thought that only a few hours had passed since they had said goodbye to each other. The forty years appeared to them like a short dream that had faded away. They sat together in silence. They had been reflecting and being serious for a while until the old warrior began to speak. The sage man uttered the last words. The last words of the four friends were the following, "We did enough for the earth; let us die now like Christians!"

Likewise, we six friends, who took Hans' instruction together, formed an intimate circle. The poem strengthened our community. If one of us met another member of our group, we would ask questions such as: Where is Abram Unruh? Do you know anything about Cornies? While I am writing these lines, I wonder where the friends of my beautiful youth are:

I oftentimes think about these friends I loved, who brought so much joy to me.
I saw how flowers were blossoming for me on my native soil
However, tears would fall on them eventually; they had faded away.
Some of them moved far away over land and sea; others went beyond the stars.
They will not come back.
Alas, I am feeling very lonely now. I am terrified.
I am lonely. I am here and crying while my friends are gone.
Yet, there will remain some people I love until I have disappeared.
Let us strive for what truly matters so that we can go to heaven.
If we do this, our disappearance will not matter.

Abram Unruh and Peter Hildebrandt died in of the Great Purge, never to return to their homeland. They were shot. Gerhard Rogalsky immigrated to Canada, and he passed away a long time ago. David Cornies went to Germany during the Second World War (1941-1945). He died with cancer in 1982. I was able to meet him in Germany. Kornelius Klassen was in a concentration camp for fifteen years. Afterwards, he lived in the Soviet Union in Kyrgyzstan.¹ I immigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1979. What happened to our teacher and brother-in-law Hans Neufeld? He could have worked as a teacher and been employed at different schools.

But in 1929, Maria and Hans joined the spontaneous emigration movement. Russian-Germans went to Moscow to obtain emigration documents. After they arrived in the surrounding of Moscow, they rented an apartment, Hans began to lead one of the groups of people who fought for travel documents. When the Soviet government eventually

¹ *Written in the margin:* He immigrated to Germany with his wife and his children in 1992. He spent his last day with his wife Agate (née Herford) in a retirement home. He died one year later.

intervened and stopped the emigration movement, the leaders of these groups were arrested because they were charged for organizing the emigration movement. [132] Hans Neufeld was also sent to prison, the notorious Butyrka prison in Moscow. There he was sentenced to ten years in exile. He was deported to a concentration camp located at the White Sea in Northern Russia. He was lucky in serving as a bookkeeper, otherwise, he would have died. He had to do this job because he was not capable of doing physical labour. In the meantime, Maria and Kolya somehow made their living during these hard years. Kolya lived either with us, or at my brother Gerhard's home. He was a proficient learner and attended a medical middle school obtaining a degree that allowed him to become a field surgeon. In 1934, Hans got an amnesty after having been five years in exile. He was allowed to go home to his family living in Stalino close to my sisters Tina and Sara at the time. The family now lived together again because Kolya also took a position as a medical emergency assistant in a coal mine. Both Hans and Maria worked as German teachers. They were happy since they all had jobs, and stable incomes. Their work went well, Kolya especially, really enjoying his work.

Unfortunately, they were not able to continue their happy life for long. During the Great Purge, Hans and Maria were arrested. Presumably, they did not receive a trial and we never knew where they had been deported. They disappeared forever without leaving a trace. Later we found out that they had been shot. Kolya married a German woman, and they had a child together. During the war, Kolya was one of the first conscripted to the forced labour army. He was deported to the camps in the Urals where he was able to work as a medical assistant again. He survived the camp and left the labour army after the war. He searched for his wife and child. They probably had died somewhere during their deportation. He married again and lived with his wife in the northern Urals, where he found a good job in his field. His wife was loyal to him, and she also helped him in the emergency medical clinic. Unfortunately, she died of lung disease. Kolya was an excellent worker. He was good in his field, and he was talented in management and administration. But his talent hurt him eventually. It frequently occurs that motivated and strict administrators engage in conflicts with their supervisors to get their work done. Working as an administrator, Kolya was never willing to compromise. In this way, his lazy and unwelcoming supervisors had a negative attitude towards him. Kolya did not shy away from criticizing someone when he was right. He was seen as both a trouble-maker, and a German. He did not expect that they wanted to take revenge on him because his supervisors pretended to be kind to him. He thought that they appreciated his work. When he somehow got sick (they had been waiting for this opportunity for a long time), he returned home more ill than before. He lost his cognitive faculties. They had given him an injection, yes, an injection. He increasingly was losing his mind. His wife took care of him for three years until he died in solitude abandoned by all his friends. "Rest in peace, Kolya!" You are a hero for me.

HANS

[133] Brother Hans¹ was born 29 April 1898 in Nordheim. In our house everything went strictly by the Mennonite custom. Grandfather's name was Peter, so the oldest son's name was Peter. The second son carried the name of the father, and ours did too. Most Mennonites emphasized such family traditions.

My memories of brother Hans are from the time he went to the middle school in Nikolayevka, in village Number 5 in the settlement of Ignatyev Colony in 1912². He had to stop because Father's mill was destroyed by fire. I was then 3 or 4 years old. It was a difficult situation for us with each child in the middle and upper ages affected. This economic fiasco had definite repercussions for brother Hans. He was then just ready to start his further studies to realize his dreams to really further his education. And now all his plans popped like soap bubbles. Later in life he never had an opportunity to continue in this direction.

At times he would think about further studies, but before he could, WWI broke out and he served as a combat medic. (I think he voluntarily enrolled with one of his friends, a certain Johann Isaak.) Because the Russian army was not able to withstand and stop the German army, the February Revolution broke out. Czar Nicholas II was removed by the cadets of the Constitutional Democratic party. At this time a provisional government was installed under Kerensky's leadership. The might of Russia was constantly and intensively undermined because of the revolutionary communist groups operating underground and led by Lenin. They were engaged by Kerensky, but he could not withstand the massive pressure of the Russian people, tired as they were of war, and desirous of peace. So, in 1917 the Proletarian October Revolution broke out. All these dramatic experiences happened around brother Hans in Moscow where he was still in the army.

With this political chaos there was little train service—bad at the best of times and now very difficult indeed. And far from his family home my brother succumbed to the typhus³ epidemic that winter. If he hadn't had inner psychological stamina, and physical vigor, he would not have survived. His decision not to buckle kept him from breaking down, and

¹ Johann Johann Toews.

² Nikolayevka was 30 km northwest of Nordheim.

³ Typhus is any one of several similar diseases caused by louse-borne bacteria. The vector flourishes under conditions of poor hygiene, such as those found in prisons or refugee camps, amongst the homeless, or, until the middle of the 20th century, in armies in the field. During World War I typhus caused three million deaths in Russia. De-lousing stations were established for troops on the Western front but the disease ravaged the armies of the Eastern front, with over 150,000 dying in Serbia alone. Fatalities were generally between 10 to 40 percent of those infected, and the disease was a major cause of death for those nursing the sick. Between 1918 and 1922 during a civil war between the White and Red armies, typhus caused at least 3 million deaths out of 20–30 million cases, largely civilians.



Johann Johann (Hans) Toews ca.1914

finding his final resting place unknown to his family. Of course, no one knew where he was, or where to look for him. Like many of his fellows, and thousands of Russian soldiers, he would have been counted among the missing.

But providence willed differently. I don't think I'm wrong [134] when I say that Hans' prayers, and the prayers of his parents, constantly ascended, especially from his little lame, and very loving mother. My parents used to pray while kneeling by their bed. Every day, mother would stand by the window and pray. Mother stood and looked out for her son for whom she had high hopes. We children had mostly given up hope of ever seeing our brother again. But mother was convinced that she would still put her arms around her son. She never doubted. That reminds me of the following verse: "And if all others have given up, a mother will never give up." And God indeed heard her prayers and answered them and she got her son back.

One day as mother stood looking out the window at the snow, mud and cold as usual (she looked from the side of her house where she could see every passerby from the train station), she suddenly cried out "Here comes Hans!" and she limped to the other side of

the house into the hall entrance without her walking stick the way she would when she was very excited and anxious to get something done. One of us had caught sight of this man coming down the street. “No mother, that is not Hans. It’s just a dirty, old, Russian vagabond.” But mother didn’t let anyone stop her running to the front door.

She ran to the door, and this man crossed the street, and came onto her yard. “It is Hans,” she said from the doorway. When the door opened, mother was barely able to put out her arms, and catch her son as he fell to the ground. We all were in the hall, and saw how mother and Hans were not saying a word, just holding onto each other. No, Hans didn’t say a word. He had fainted. Now we all had reached them. His dirty clothes were taken away, and he was put to bed. Without a word or anything, he just let us do what needed to be done. When we took his temperature, it was 41.5° C¹ which is the highest temperature a human can survive. He had typhus.

Father was not at home. He had gone with horse and wagon to perform some public work ordered by the administration. Brother Gerhard had ridden to the school in a neighbouring village. So, the weight of our brother’s care was taken over by sister Tina and mother. We younger ones, Liese, Elvira, and I, were sent into the children’s room because Hans had to be isolated as much as possible to keep us from contracting the infection too.

For ten days brother Hans vacillated between life and death with a high fever, and without speaking. Then my sister Tina also got typhus, and she lay down beside her brother. She had done most of the care for her sick brother because mother had to look after the household. Sister Liese did the cooking, and we two youngest, and also my brother Gerhard, stayed in the nursery at night.

Hans’ condition gradually improved. [135] Hans’ temperature went down. The crisis was over. Sister Tina had also come through that critical stage.

Now Hans began talking. He told us how, on an over-crowded train, sometimes even on the roof, he had battled to not lose consciousness. Without a shadow of a doubt, he could not break down, or he would be lost. No water was offered him. He was aware that sick people in the best of circumstances would generally be thrown off at the first station with no one to look after them. Finally, they would simply be removed, and buried. So, he could not give in.

When he read the inscription Zhelanaya at the station², he knew had finally arrived. He dragged himself into the waiting room and sat down. He suddenly remembered he wasn’t yet home. “Even if I sit here, who will know me? And I can’t die here. Will somebody get me? No, no one who I know will come in such weather when nobody is out. No one I know will accidentally pass by, and help me. I have to walk the five or six kilometres,” he thought. And so he started the long walk.

¹ It is common for typhus sufferers to have temperatures of 39° C or more.

² The railway station at Zhelanaya served the whole Memrik colony, and was the usual station used by people from Nordheim.

“My eyes have closed; my legs are hardly able to walk. I slowly put one foot in front of the other.” How long he walked he didn’t know. He hadn’t wanted to walk through the village Ebental. It was between the train station, and our village, and was almost impossible to avoid. How he avoided it, he could not remember. But he came to the road that went past the cemetery, then across the street, and directly to our house. “I knew that I wanted to go home,” he said, “and I had to do it all on my own. Nobody would help me. But when I saw the door of our house, I saw mother. Then I had no more energy. I wasn’t responsible any more. If I’d have had to go further, I would have willed myself to make it, but when I heard mother’s voice, then I collapsed like a sack.”

He recuperated slowly, and when he thought he was better, he walked out, and wanted to help shovel snow (we had lots that winter). Then he suffered another attack just like the first, and then another attack again. It was the kind of typhus that comes again and again, and no one knows when it will stop. But by spring, both Hans and Tina were well away and walking.

The Revolution had been successful, but the fighting was not over. Even though Russia made peace with the Central Powers in Brest-Litovsk, the civil war continued. There were a number of anarchist bands organized, especially by Makhno, that terrorized people, thieving, destroying and murdering.

During the Christmas holidays, our house was ransacked. Hans lost his last clothes and shoes¹. Till then we had sung and played music a lot under Han’s direction. The Makhno bandits took the violin, and guitar, and destroyed the mandolin. Only the zither remained. Our music was not as good now, [136] but the singing continued. The bandits could not steal our singing.

In those years, when Hans and Tina said good night in our nursery, we often sang. Before this it usually hadn’t happened. Anna and Sara went away from home very early on, and Peter had little interest for singing and playing. By contrast we now read much, recited poems, sang songs, played instruments and laughed. It also happened that brother Johann would sometimes give us a talking to. We accepted it all from him. Singing, music making, reading, debating, playing games and laughing became our routine, and stayed with us until our parents were sent away. Then all normal life fled from our home.

During the war in 1914-1916, before brother Hans joined the medical corps, my brother, Hans, organized a group of young people who wanted to further their education. The German speaking schools had been closed and the schoolhouses locked and sealed.

After the war years, most everyone was very poor and hungry. And the typhus epidemics grew, and our neighbour Johann Toews, (no relation) also got typhus. We couldn’t find medical help, and then brother Johann (Hans) took over the care of this neighbour. In spite of all the care, he didn’t make it. He died and was buried. Home remedies alone weren’t sufficient to defeat this epidemic.

¹ He probably was only left with the clothes on his back because pictures in 1926 still show him wearing his medical corps uniform.

Memories of His Homeland

The path between us and the neighbours had been well used during this time, and had been kept quite open. The young widow, Justina, needed a lot of help with the farming and brother Hans helped her. Justina was an attractive woman and had always been very welcome in our home. She was young, healthy, with a happy disposition and also pretty. No wonder that all this help from one side turned to deeper feelings of caring. After Justina's first year of mourning was over, my brother Hans asked for her hand in marriage.

For her benefit, let me tell you that she didn't have to change her family name. But changes did happen with her young husband. Her first husband's name was Johann Peter Toews—father's name was also Johann Peter Toews—neighbours with the same name! In order to differentiate, the house numbers were always said: father's name became Johann Peter Toews #9; our neighbour, Johann Peter Toews #14. Now things became simpler. Father stayed Johann Toews and our neighbour became Hans Toews. People often said: Old Toews and Young Toews.

Though Justina was about 10 years older than her second husband, she kept herself young and happy. They was harmony in their marriage. What was a bit different was that Justina had an adopted daughter, Maria. She was a good child but for them to get used to each other required much patience, wisdom, and understanding—things in short supply in brother Hans. But with much work, he was able to have harmony between them, and keep it. Soon of course, they had their own children, a good thing for both, to knit them together. Economically there were no difficulties, and the relationship between our two homes was always good and warm, even if there were times of mistrust.

1918-1919 were the years of Civil War. They were difficult in the various parts of Russia, some more difficult than others, until the Russian Red Army had totally defeated the generals of the White Army: Koltschatz, Denikin, Judenitsch.

[Here the account has been interrupted and the following note inserted.]

Dear Nieces and Nephews:

You will possibly notice that the discussion of my brother Hans' life stops very abruptly. I am afraid if I went on, I would become very subjective, and that wouldn't be of benefit. I beg you, please finish Hans' life in Canada and add all your memories of him. Would you do that also for sister Tina. I would be thankful for that. We, Katja and I, have never known how your father, Hans and your aunt, Tina, lived in America. We are sad about this. But to be honest, from our own impressions we have to say that we were sometimes disappointed in both Tina and Hans. Don't be insulted by this. We have been very happy to get to know you all a little bit, and by and large we are happy for that.

I thank you all, and I hope that you will understand my point.

Your Uncle David.¹

¹ The lives of 'Hans' (Johann Johann Toews) and Justina is well told in *Seeds for Spring* by Crystal Dohie, 2017. ISBN9781548225803. Crystal is Hans and Justina's granddaughter. Also, Hans and Justina's son, George Victor Toews, has poeticized episodes in *The Black Elixir*, 2000. ISBN0968423140.

TINA

[151] My sister Tina¹ was born on 20 December 1899 in Nordheim. Speaking about her childhood, I remember that she obtained her final degree from the teacher Gerhard Bergen. I think she did very well because I remember how much my family celebrated her graduation. Tina always enjoyed learning and gaining new knowledge. However, an unfortunate chain of events prevented her from continuing her education: the mill fire and its negative consequences, the First World War and the subsequent Civil War, bad harvests, and famine. But Tina did not give up her hopes of further education, even though she did not attend school for ten years. Instead, she was at home, watering the calves, feeding the goslings, cutting grain sheaves, or weeding the grain. In wintertime, she spent her time singing in the choir, reading many books while cracking sunflower seeds, darning socks, heating the oven, and doing everything necessary to keep a farm running. Luckily, she obtained our father's permission to attend a medical middle school, as she was then twenty-four. After three years she graduated with the highest grades and became a nurse. She was employed at a hospital in Rutschenkovo-Stalino (previously called Yusovka), the capital of the Donbas region of Ukraine. Tina's hard work and outstanding reliability brought her success. She was popular among her patients. And her medical colleagues appreciated her. She had a good reputation and was popular in the hospital. Public officials also valued her work. Indeed, she was appreciated everywhere because she cared for the sick, and was rewarded for her committed nursing, and for helping anyone in need. She received support to do intensive training to become a dentist. Tina was very proficient in her new job so that she was soon able to work independently. Both she and her husband were dentists.

She did much for our parents as well for which we were always grateful. She also helped my father until his illness and death. In fact, she was still standing beside him when he was buried in his home village.

Our whole family, Sara, Tina, Katja and I, enjoyed getting together in Tina's apartment where our parents also lived there. Those were good times.

After the death of my father, she married a bookkeeper whose name was Sakustska (1939). She moved with him to Voronezh². Unfortunately, they weren't together very long since he was arrested and disappeared in 1940. As was normal in those times, he was arrested, never received a trial, and disappeared like the thousands of other people who suffered from the same fate before or after him. Tina escaped deportation to Siberia during the war because she changed her last name so that she was no longer recognizable as German. Whether she did better because of this is debatable. [152] During her flight, she travelled through Poland and Germany³ until she arrived in Canada. Even though Tina would have been able to work as a dentist in Poland and Germany, she encountered

¹ Katharina Toews

² In 2021 Voronezh (Воронеж), Voronezh Oblast, Russia

³ Tina's flight to Canada must have been quite complicated. We know she was in Dresden during the British-American carpet bombing of that city in February 1945.

difficulties there. She then went to Canada, at first, staying with her sister Anna and brother Hans. However, she was not able to work as a dentist in Canada. Nevertheless, the work she did do allowed her to have her own nice home. As I am writing this, it has been a long ago that she passed away.



Katharina (Tina) Toews (no date)

In 1980, we visited our relatives in Canada. At that time, Tina was still alive and spent her last days in a retirement home where her sister Anna had also lived during her last years. We had a lot to talk about with Tina. My brother Hans picked her up from the retirement home and brought her to his own house, where she spent some days so that we were able to talk with her in peace. She was mentally fit and was capable of thinking and reasoning. Tina could remember days and events that happened a long time ago. She told us about the journeys and experiences during the war, about the time she was working in Poland and Germany, and how she found a well-paying job in Canada. She then related how she purchased, and then gave up an apartment. Tina also had a good relationship with

her sister Anna and Anna's children. She told us how she was doing with brother Hans, his second wife, Clara, and Hans' children. She did not complain about any relative directly. However, she complained about Hans whenever he was mentioned. She said that she had not had anything against him in particular. Everyone has flaws—nobody is perfect. Yet she meant that Hans had been absolutely unkind to her. He had become like an average American whose manner of thinking and acting is terrible. Therefore, he had done this to her in America. She could not forgive him that he had forced her to go “into exile” to the retirement home in order to get rid of her. He had only pretended that he had been concerned about her health. She claimed that my brother had become greedy and selfish. She was robbed, after she had collapsed. She asked her brother to help her to find out who had committed the crime, but he remained silent as if he had something to do with it. She did not have a problem leaving her belongings at her brother's home. Yet, she could not understand, bear, and forgive the fact that they claimed she had lost her mind so that they could bring her to a retirement home. For this reason, both siblings were fighting with each other at any occasion, even though they used to be very close. Although Tina and Hans were unhappy about their bad relationship, they were not able to forgive each other in a brotherly or Christian manner. I felt very sorry for my sister, and I asked her whether she would like to come with us to Germany. She refused my proposal because she did not want me to ruin my relationship with my Canadian relatives.

In my opinion, my sister made the big mistake not to return to Germany after she had become aware that she had not gone along with her Canadian relatives. However, I have to admit that the reason for the conflict between my sister Tina and my brother Hans is unknown to me. What happened to them will probably remain unknown. Tina died on 9 November 1982 without having made peace with her brother. What should I think about it? Nevertheless, I believe that the secret will be revealed eventually. I hope that God will not repay them for that.¹

GERHARD

[153] My Brother Gerhard was born on 27 July 1904 in Nordheim. Considering that he was five years older than me, I can imagine how he went to school, and how he played with my sister Liese, as much as I used to play with Elvira. Gerhard and Liese went to school at the same time. Gerhard Berger was their teacher. They said that Gerhard was a very agile, curious, and prankish boy. He was already a talented athlete before attending school. However, his talent would turn out to be negative for him.

Our parents' home was next to the school and we only had to walk through the garden to enter the schoolyard. A high gymnastics apparatus stood there to serve the students. Once Gerhard jumped on the apparatus (even though our parents had forbidden it) when the students were playing on the schoolyard. The older ones enjoyed seeing how this small boy performed gymnastics so well. They encouraged Gerhard to climb up and down the

¹ *Written in the margin:* She was eighty-three years old.

pole again and again, and they, indeed, enjoyed it. Not surprisingly, my brother also appreciated the praise from older students. Unfortunately, one day my brother fell from a significant height so that he dislocated his left hip. If there had been appropriate, immediate medical treatment he would have had a little bit of pain, and my father would have penalized him with a spanking. But Gerhard decided not to tell our parents about this incident because he did not understand what had happened to him. He knew he had done something that was forbidden, but that it hadn't hurt very much. He did begin to walk slower, however. After a while my parents examined Gerhard carefully, and found out that Gerhard hadn't been struggling to walk because of a splinter in his heel. (He had told this story to them to conceal the truth.) By then, medical treatment could not help Gerhard anymore. His hip hadn't grown together properly so that it became impossible to reset it, and the malformation didn't disappear. Gradually, the pain did weaken until it was completely gone. In the meantime, his left leg did not grow properly and was never as long as the right leg: four to five centimetres shorter. He wore a shoe with a raised heel to avoid limping. He always had problems buying new shoes, and the shoemaker always had to make modifications.

He suffered all his life with this impaired leg whenever he walked long distances, or had to carry heavy items. This was his severe punishment for his misdeed, perhaps, too severe. No one could have anticipated the consequences of his fall. During Gerhard's childhood, my parents and we siblings, did not care much about his impairment. But as Gerhard grew, he developed several accidental and unexpected tendencies. They resulted from his relatives' pity, and from the negligence, intentions, and irony of so-called benefactors. This reminds me of the proverb: Whoever is disadvantaged will be derided.

[154] He began to feel inferior, and less valuable than others. He distanced himself from his peers, and became isolated. Young people often have difficulties in coping with such misfortunes, developing psychological stress. However, it also occurs that they are eager to overcome difficulties in order to find a replacement for past happiness. Gerhard was able to do this before he fell into depression. He said, "I learned that knowledge is power too." And so he began to study. My parents were happy about his zeal, and they did everything they could do to provide him with opportunities for learning without materially restricting him. Likewise, his siblings helped to create conditions that were favourable to his learning.

Gerhard became one of the first students in the secondary school established in our area. Then he attended the Central School in Nikolayevka. Afterwards, he was employed as a teacher in Kuban, and did teacher education through a correspondence course at the same time. Later, he worked together with our brother-in-law, Hans Neufeld, at a school in Romanovka¹ in the northern Caucasus. He was still single, and spent summer holidays with us at home. He helped at the farm as much as we did, weeding, mowing, threshing, harvesting, picking fruits, taking care of cattle, mucking out the stables, and cleaning the horses. We were always happy about him being home. He had achieved his first goal, becoming a well-trained village teacher, having the right temperament and knowledge. His

¹ In 2021 Romanovka, a village near Olgino, Stavropol Krai, Russia.

students liked him, and was highly esteemed by parents. Gradually, with hard work, he became a qualified teacher for biology and chemistry. Then he worked at a middle school in Romanovka, a village of peaceful German-Lutherans. At that time, the village was not named after Russia's ruling dynasty anymore, but was called Karlsfeld, a name inspired by the ideological father of socialism, Karl Marx. Later, Gerhard often remarked that he had spent his best years there. Besides teaching, his hobby was singing. He conducted the children's choir at school, and the youth choir of the village. Through this, he improved his use of cipher notation. He collected a plentitude of songs, both familiar and new. When he returned home for his summer holiday, he brought new songs. Hans and Tina introduced singing by ear at home accompanied by instruments: guitar, mandolin, and zither. Gerhard supplemented our singing with music theory. In addition, we received a harmonium¹. He made us familiar with four-part harmony: Tina sang soprano, Liese and Elvira alto, he and I tenor, and Hans Dueck, Liese's husband, bass. Our family choir sang every evening after we finished work. Sometimes an audience would gather on the street to listen. We often had new songs. Tina and Liese played guitars, Gerhard mandolin, our brother-in-law, Hans Dueck, the zither, and Elvira and I the harmonium. Indeed, we often sang, and made a lot of music. [155] Our motto was when singing, sit back and relax; evil people have no songs. I must write down the full lyrics to some of our songs:

Power of Song²

1. What would be our life without sound and singing?
They have to grant us joy for our entire life.
Answer this question: What makes us stronger during our pilgrimage?
German songs and singing!
 2. If we lose our courage, we won't achieve anything,
In this case, you need immediately to strike up a merry song,
You will then surely regain the courage you are missing,
The soul needs songs as the soil needs dew.
 3. Larks are singing in the sky, while nightingales sing in the forest,
Swallows sing in the holes in the wall, quails sing on the fields.
Every being is striking up their songs full of joy and freedom,
Therefore, let us sing full of joy and freedom until the end.
-
1. Singing makes life more beautiful, and refreshes the heart,
God made us song to mitigate our pains and sorrows.
Therefore, let us sing full of joy like merry birds,
Let us sing one song after the other full of love and joy.

¹ *Fußharmonium*: A reed organ with a bellows inflated by pumping the foot pedals and a sound not unlike an accordion. It could be folded into a compact form for travel.

² *Macht des Gesangs*

2. The heart shall be devoted to the good.
In this way, our entire life will consist of joy and singing.
Well then, let us sing like merry birds.
Let us sing one song after the other full of love and joy.
3. A merry song of joy is in the air.
The song hovers over fields, meadows, mountains, and valleys.
So, let us sing full of joy like merry birds.
Let us praise the One who dwells in heaven.
1. I often rested among the persons I love, resting on sweet-smelling grass.
Then I sang a short song, and everything was good again.
2. I often had bad dreams, being lonely, having a gloomy and uneasy mood.
However, everything was better after I started singing again.
3. I often experienced things that made me angry and upset.
However, everything was better after I started singing again.
4. You do not need to mourn about the painful times any longer,
You just need to sing, and everything will turn out good again.
1. We are happy sitting together, enjoying each other's company.
We make our life more joyful together, hopefully, never to end.
2. Yet, things can't remain the same forever under the changing moon.
A time will come when the beings that live with us will wither away.
3. Be aware that everything will change! Maintain your friendships!
We do not know how soon this will happen, scattering east and west.
4. Yet our hearts will stay close to each other, even though we are far apart.
We will all be happy if something good happens to one.
5. When we meet again after taking different directions,
We will weave merry farewell and merry beginning together.

We didn't only sing songs devoted to the power of song. Many were songs of homeland, celebrated maternal love, and nature. Songs definitely made us think about the world in many different ways. Singing often gave us strength to cope with the difficulties of life. [156] We siblings, who used to sing together with Gerhard, need to thank him for several beautiful songs. We were able to improve our understanding of singing tremendously because of his enthusiasm for vocal music.

Memories of His Homeland

At the present moment, while I am writing down my memories living in the Black Forest in Germany, I often think about the last couple of years we spent together in my parent's home. In a particular way, vocal music formed the experiences of those of us who belonged to the second group of children in my family. Singing brought Tina, Gerhard, Liese, and me together! I want to write some lines that I have in mind to symbolize our connection. Memories (written in 1982, in Canada)¹:

When I am walking in the forest alone to be calm, I often recall my homeland, which used to watch me intimately. Oh, my beautiful and beloved homeland, how much I loved your green hills! I took pleasure in gardens, shrubs, heathlands, and everything else that pleased the heart. The flowers had wonderful fragrance. The trees shaded the roads. I felt joy in my heart. When you are at home, you forget any pain. At dusk, after work, we would seek rest. Then the choir of siblings would start to sing German songs. Moreover, we would make music skillfully with our string instruments. Many songs were sung at that "time between times." But times change, and villains do not sleep. They ponder how to destroy hope. Because of them, my parents had to leave their home in their old age, and go on the road. My parents had to fight for their home, sacrificing themselves. My parents' home was not a building, but ten children. They were always happy whenever they could catch sight of one their children coming back from far away. The children used to return to this beloved homeland. Yet, at a point, our home ceased to exist. We were spread around the world—our choir and our string instruments silenced. Your homeland won't be your homeland if your parents do not live there any longer. In this case, you stop wishing to return home. Indeed, our home is a holy place that you should never be forced to abandon. But it happened, and our misfortune will not give us back our home.

Let us now return to the life of my brother, Gerhard. In Romanovka, Gerhard got to know a girl called Maria Hahn who lived with her grandmother. Her parents used to be well off, but they had been completely expropriated. Like my parents, they had to wander from one place to another. In 1930, Gerhard married Maria. In the summer after our wedding, during Gerhard's holidays, they visited us in Nordheim. By then, our home was already partially destroyed after we had attempted to emigrate. Gerhard invited me to come to Karlsfeld. I accepted his invitation in 1931. With Gerhard's help, I was able to start a teaching career. My brother helped me a lot during this time, and I have always been grateful for his support. Perhaps, I was not grateful enough then.

Gerhard did not have an easy job. He had to work hard to make progress toward his second aim: to study science. He intended to enroll at a university and obtain a degree so that he could work in the scientific field even though his work would have been teaching. [157] In 1932, he fulfilled the first part of his wish, the more important one, being accepted at a teacher training college for science (a university). Hence, he left Romanovka.

¹ [*written on the left margin*: I added to this collection a little bit later: We enjoy remembering our homeland even though it is far away from us. We have replaced our homeland by a motherland, the Federal Republic of Germany.]

The first years at university are usually challenging. Gerhard struggled at the beginning. He wasn't alone. He had a wife and a child. However, his great misfortune happened after he had obtained the university degree, and found a job in his first year of teaching.

On 1 December 1934 the man called Nikolayev shot Kirov, one of the most significant officials of the Communist Party in Leningrad. The assassination took place in Kirov's own office. He died immediately. Stalin announced a series of persecutions throughout all regions of the Soviet Union. About fifteen people who lived in the village where Gerhard had begun to work were arrested by 4 December. Four of them were teachers, Gerhard among them. Obviously, they did not have anything to do with the assassination. Nevertheless, thousands of people were tried and deported¹. Gerhard was sentenced to seven years of deportation, although he was innocent. After six years, he was released from prison because he had atoned for his misdeeds. He went to his family, who lived in the district where my family used to live, and had to start all over again. In 1939, he was employed as a school accountant. Later, he was allowed to teach. But in 1941, before he could even start to teach a class, war broke out.

Previously, Gerhard and Maria had five children, the oldest of them, a son called Adelbert. Afterwards, Maria twice gave birth to twins. One of them had died while Gerhard was deported. Maria was a very good-natured and lovely woman, but she was a little bit indecisive. She was a talented pianist. Gerhard and Maria had a good marriage. She had to go through very hard times of deprivation during the period of Gerhard's deportation, and then again during the Second World War. These years had a negative impact on her health. She became frail when she got older. Gerhard suffered mentally from Maria's poor health.

In 1941, Gerhard was conscripted into the labour army like ten thousand other people after Second World War began.² He was deported to the Northern Urals. In Russia, this slave labour was paid by hunger. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, starved to death. Gerhard was allowed to quit his service after about one year. He could return to his family, who had been deported from European Russia into Siberia like all ethnic Germans. Gerhard found that his family had also survived and lived on a kolkhoz (collective farm). At this point, the family was almost reunited again, but the oldest son was still missing. He had been injured at age 10 in a bombardment during their deportation. He had been taken away to a hospital somewhere, and the family had to search for him. [158] They found him somewhere in the Novosibirsk area. Now the family was reunited again, but with little to eat. They had been suffering from hunger for a long time, and were very weak. Gerhard could not find a job as a teacher because the Soviet government still did not trust ethnic Germans. But my brother was able to help himself because of his broad knowledge. Besides biology, chemistry, and math, he had also studied physics. So, he was knowledgeable about electro-mechanics, too. As a result, he was able to work as an

¹ Internal exile.

² The Soviet government saw ethnic Germans living in the U.S.S.R. as a security risk. Conscription into forced labour was introduced to prevent possible collaboration with the Nazis invaders. Estimates are that 15 and 18 million people were held prisoner in the Gulags under Stalin, and that 1.6 million of these died.

electrical mechanic in a tractor workshop in Halbstadt, a worker village. When I was allowed to leave my forced labour and to return home in 1945, I found my brother working in that workshop, where he was employed as an instrument metalworker. We both worked in the same village until 1946. First, I was hired in the local eight-grade school; then Gerhard was too. We both could teach our own subjects. Later on, this became a middle school where Gerhard worked until 1965 when he retired. His children became adults able to support him. In this way he was able to get his own house. All his children were able to study. Adalbert became an engineer, the second son a doctor, the oldest daughter a teacher, the younger a professional chef. All his children succeeded in building their own lives.

Gerhard's wife became increasingly frail. So, he decided to move to a warmer region in the Caucasus, something his wife especially wanted. In 1973, I visited him. By that time, Maria was already confined to her bed. In 1974, she died because of lung disease.

In 1976, Gerhard married a widow with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life in Nartkala in the Kabardino-Balkarian Autonomous Republic.

He is now eighty years old (he was born in 1908). He is relatively fit so that he can still visit his children who are pursuing their careers in their everyday life. He has seven grandchildren. All children have normal and honourable lives enjoying good health.

In summary, Gerhard achieved his goals: a good education (after thirty-five years?), success as a teacher, sang a lot, and raised well-behaved children. But his life had never been easy. He always had to fight to survive. Furthermore, he suffered a lot from his seven-year-long deportation. Despite all these hardships, he preserved his mental strength. And he was physically healthy.

Gerhard and I always had a good relationship because I fully accepted him as my older brother. That doesn't mean we always agreed. By contrast, there is a fundamental gulf between my attitude and his towards life that is just normal. We both were determined to complement each other so that we both benefited from each other. Our brotherly connection frequently brought us together. I want to point out that there was a strong bond between Gerhard, Liese, Elvira and I that helped us through many difficult circumstances. I admit, Gerhard was the main contributor to this bond for which I am grateful. We always supported each other. [158A] Our lives moved on. Time prepared many surprises for Gerhard. The years my brother spent in Nartkala turned out to be a period with many challenges. He was not prepared for them at all. At the dawn of his life, it was impossible for him to anticipate the surprise of heavy sorrows.

Firstly, Gerhard's daughter turned out to be a problem child. Before she died, Maria had urged Gerhard to keep an eye on their daughter, Lena. He took his promise too literally, and felt obligated to sacrifice himself entirely for her wellbeing. He didn't encourage her to solve her own problems. Lena became irresponsible. During her first marriage, she gave birth to a son (Eduard). She had a daughter from her second marriage (Viktoria). Because she had learned about Gerhard's promise, she shamelessly took advantage of her father's weakness. Consequently, she "bestowed" these two children on Gerhard. So, in the end

Gerhard was taking care of both his daughter and his two grandchildren. Lena had married twice, but both husbands had run away from her.

Secondly, Gerhard's second marriage did not work out. She was a widow called Martha, and already had one daughter. Martha was a hard-working nurse who owned her own home. She gradually had become aware that Gerhard was dedicating his pension and himself entirely to his daughter and grandson, Eduard, who was already married. Martha allowed her new husband to leave, and their marriage was dissolved.

His third problem was Lena. She had been admitted to teacher training college by completing a correspondence course. Somehow, she also managed to obtain that degree. However, she had not acquired any knowledge through this program that prepared her to teach German at a middle school. She was actually unqualified to teach. It turned out to be impossible for her to work at a school because of her negligence, and of her conviction that she had received an academic education (since she had obtained a university degree). Even though she was hired by schools, her work experiences were always characterized by scandals, and misunderstandings. Lena's father felt obligated to defend his daughter whenever she was involved in a scandal because he was recognized as a knowledgeable teacher. [158B] People regarded him as an excellent pedagogue, knowing that he had been an enthusiastic and hard-working teacher with about forty years of a successful career. He spent fifteen years saving her from the scandals, but adhered to the promise he had given to his dying wife. Without doubt, my brother was genuinely loyal to his promise and supported his daughter. I believe that he gradually became unaware of its actual harm. It is not clear whether Lena ever rewarded her father for his commitment.

At one point, Gerhard realized that it was time for him to leave the Caucasus when it became plain that the Caucasian and central Asian nations wanted to liberate their countries from all "foreigners" after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Gerhard decided to move to Slavgorod to live closer to his children, and bought a house. We were able to help him, and he allowed Liese to stay with him. In this way, he returned to Siberia, spending several years with Liese and her family. Liese's stepchildren supported him with food.

In 1993, all members of the Fast family¹ moved to Germany with Gerhard, Liese, and the whole Marzinkewitsch family too. They all arrived on July 20, and settled in Münster. Immediately after her arrival, Liese laid down, and died on her birthday, 22 December 1993. She was eighty-eight years old.

What happened to my brother Gerhard? He is now ninety years old, and "weak in body and soul" as the saying goes. He is hardly able to tell a coherent story. He easily gets angry and aggressive. Elvira and Gerhard do not have an easy life. I am sorry for them. They did not really benefit from moving to Germany.

What happened to Lena? She says what she thinks. To be more precise, she speaks without thinking. She now has her own family. She spends her time waiting for her father's

¹ Liese's second marriage was to a man named Fast.

pension. Her behaviour confirms the old saying: nothing is so hard as a person's ingratitude. We'll have to wait and see.

LIESE

[159] My sister Liese¹ was born on 23 December 1905 in Nordheim. She was four years older than me. She was truly a Christmas child. Mother said she was always a lovely, obedient, and studious child. Her childhood and teenage years took place as my father had to go through his most severe economic crisis. New crises hit our family ever since Liese's tenth birthday. Our mill burned down. The First World War broke out. German schools were forbidden and closed down so she only went to school for three years. Then there was the Russian Revolution, followed by bad harvests, and years of hunger. During these times, our family experienced much turmoil. Anna got to her degree and married. Peter and Maria created big problems. Then Sara had her drama. Hans went to war. Robbers plundered our homeland. Gerhard had a hard time completing his education, and Tina finished her education. Liese grew into adulthood, and prepared for marriage. She decided to marry Johann Dueck. I do not know whether the wedding took place in 1925, 1926 or 1927.

Liese was a very sensitive person and whenever something happened at home, she was the most affected. She was also modest so she never contradicted, or refused anything that pertained to her siblings. The hard years she had to go through made her overcome hardships with ease in comparison to her siblings. She did not like to attend gatherings of girls. However, she was very hospitable and happy about visitors, for example, Sara Klassen (who was called Mrs. Paul later), Neta Dörksen, and Gretha Voth. Otherwise, she felt entirely satisfied staying at home and doing domestic work. She enjoyed milking, and breeding calves, and other small domestic animals. She never missed prayer meeting or choir practice. She wrote down songs and spent time learning them by heart, but she was not good at reading books. Liese decided to be baptized when she was young, and became a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church. From this time onwards, she was a dedicated reader of the Bible. Whenever we sang at home, Liese would be the first one to come and the last to leave. Liese was good at handwriting and spelling because she practiced through copying texts. In particular, Liese enjoyed gardens and flowers. She was always busy with weeding and planting because she wanted the area around our home to look good. She also liked to prepare surprises for other people.

At home, she was always the one who was cleaning and tidied so that everything looked beautiful—the house, the yard, and the garden. She knew several small sayings, cute poems, and children's songs, which she wanted to teach her children. By contrast, she didn't care about science. She had the natural inclinations of a mother and housewife. Her goal was to marry an orderly man who would be a diligent farmer and father. Furthermore, she wanted several children, a beautiful house both from inside and outside, a large barn with lots of cattle, and a good-looking garden. In short, she dreamed about an ideal Mennonite family and farm.

¹ Liese is a diminutive form of Elizabeth

[160] Her mental stimulation came from singing accompanied by a guitar, reading moralist-religious books, attending gatherings at her parents' home, and participating in all sorts of religious activities. She was not a fanatic, but she intentionally pursued them without losing her modesty. Liese was much appreciated and all her siblings opened their heart to her and were willing to help her. We siblings of the second group, Tina, Gerhard, Elvira, and I (the older siblings hardly got to know her) knew Liese was incredibly hard-working, smart, successful at homework, devout, generous, and friendly. She came close to her dream of being an ideal Mennonite housewife. She never did anything that made my parents punish her, and she never vexed us. Everyone loved Liese. Nevertheless, my father once said, "I feel sorry for Liese." Those of us who were with my father before his death, were puzzled by this. What had he noticed about or in Liese? What did he mean? We did not know.

Liese stayed at my parents' home until 1925. She took care of it with my mother and Elvira. Apart from Liese and Elvira, I was the only sibling still living at home then.

Johann Nikolai Dueck, who Liese married, was an orderly boy, an orphan who was knowledgeable about singing and music. He also enjoyed reading so he didn't have much time for running the farm. In addition to this, Hans was not suited for demanding manual labour. His elbow joint did not grow correctly at the proper angle so he was unable to stretch out his arms or extend his arm at a 90-degree angle. His impairment necessitated many extra movements for his difficult work. The way he moved stood in sharp contrast to his wife. He never took long steps, while his wife was always walking at a half trot. Hans was never in a hurry, while his wife was constantly short of time. Hans never needed very much. By contrast, Liese was eager to do a lot of things and to have enough of everything.

After the collectivization of farms, Hans became an accountant. Liese first worked as a milker, then, as a cook. Later on, she worked in a nursery, and then in charge of the small village shop. Besides this, she served as a harvest hand. Liese always gave a hand where help was needed.

When it was time for her to give birth to her first child, it was too late for a Caesarean operation, and the delivery could not take place naturally. The only remaining alternative was to remove the child from the womb piece by piece. Her second and third births took place in time by a Caesarean section. They now had a son, Hans, and a daughter, Liese. However, she was not able to have more children because the doctors said that another Caesarean would kill her. Liese eventually had to accept their judgement. She took medical measures to prevent another birth. Time went by, and her two children grew up.

In 1941, at the outbreak of Second World War, Hans was forced to serve in the Labour Army in the Northern Urals. That was similar to being deported to a concentration camp. He suffered from hunger, and struggled every day to survive. [161] Liese, her children, our mother, and other ethnic Germans, were deported to a small and impoverished Siberian village called Stepnoje located in the Altai Krai. There she had to work in a kolkhoz. Life was a misery for her family as well as all others deported. In 1942, Hans was allowed to quit the Labour Army, as he was almost dead. But he reached his family half alive. After regaining his health, he worked as an accountant for the kolkhoz. The material condition

for the family improved. Liese's family had survived the hardships despite hunger and frightening experiences. I wonder whether they were grateful enough for their rescue from death. I am unaware since I also was forced to do slave labour. My mother wrote that Liese's daughter had gotten ill and died, only fourteen years old. Her son of ten or eleven was the only one left.

In 1946, my mother passed away. She was buried in the second grave on the graveyard of that poor small Siberian village, but it was not the last. Hans contracted lung disease when the economic situation of Liese's family had significantly improved. Hans could not receive proper medical treatment since he was considered an enemy as an ethnic German. It didn't matter that he was still young and capable of work. In 1952, he also died and was buried in the same cemetery. Later the village was dissolved and all its inhabitants had to leave. They moved to the bigger nearby village. Their houses, or cottages to be more precise, were torn down, and the entire area was ploughed over back to farmland. The name of Steponje disappeared together with its graveyard. My family, especially my sister, had no grave to visit there anymore.

Now Liese lived alone together with her son in the house that she and her husband had purchased. She had to sell this house. She moved to the small worker town called Halbstadt where Gerhard was a teacher at that time. There she bought her own apartment.

Liese's son, Hans, graduated from the local school. His mother sent him far away to a professional school. He was a good student but was not sufficiently prepared to leave home and live in a city among strangers. He was a well-mannered and good-looking boy. Yet, he did not notice that a German schoolmate, Elvira, wanted to seduce him. Elvira was an attractive and beautiful girl. She was studious too. However, she was also energetic, smart, and intelligent. She knew what she wanted, and seduced Hans (later marrying him). That's what happened. He had little say in the matter. No one had taught him what a young man has to do to get acquainted with a girl. He did not understand his own feelings, being just attracted to a girl, or really liking her. He wasn't able to tell whether the girl was his true soul mate and partner, or whether he was only fond of her. Obviously, he was aware that he was a man, and Elvira a woman. [162] He remained the same little boy who his mother had brought up for her own sake. He was a true gosling, to say it in plain language. He was naïve, indecisive, and inexperienced. By contrast, Elvira knew what she wanted, and whom she wanted for a husband.

Love? That was a little too abstract for Elvira. Appreciating someone—that was what she was able to understand, something that her feelings could grasp. She figured out how to manipulate Hans according to her desires, even though it contradicted his wishes, and his mother's. Unlike Hans, she was not innocent. Rather, she was an experienced woman. She only wanted to marry him. Doubtlessly, she would achieve her aim. After they both had finished school, the time approached when they would be parted from each other. Hans was preparing to return home. Elvira put an end to the dalliance. She made herself crystal clear, "You told me that your mother liked children. Let us make two or three other children for her." It appeared to her that Hans did not understand what she wanted. So, she added, "We are now three, you, me, and the child I am expecting. I am sure you don't doubt that you are the father. You know that this is our and your mother's child." Hans' indecisiveness

could not resist Elvira's resoluteness. They married in a civil ceremony before taking the train home to Hans' mother. Liese was surprised by them when they arrived at her home as a married couple expecting a child. They all three now lived together, expecting a child. It did not matter whether Hans and Liese were happy about it as long as Elvira got what she wanted.

Elvira then revealed her true character—indescribable. I have not the heart to write down the ugly and offensive words she used to address and insult her mother-in-law. Her "refined vocabulary" mainly consisted of German words. She added Russian expressions to take more pleasure in her slurs and make it even more hurtful for her mother-in-law. Why did she mistreat Liese? For what purpose? Obviously, there was no reason to be mean to her mother-in-law. Her only objective was to torture her mother-in-law. Perhaps, she also wanted to cause Hans to move out of his mother's house. Yet, Hans remained silent. He said nothing when Elvira threw Liese out of the house during the winter. Liese went to Gerhard's and slept at his house. Did Gerhard help his sister? He might have tried, but without success. Time passes. Elvira gave birth to three sons, and Liese took care of all of them despite the conflict.

Both Hans and Elvira worked as teachers at a vocational school. Elvira was not popular among her colleagues, but her students appreciated her. In the meantime, Hans did professional training, and became a hard-working mechanical engineer. He did an excellent job as head of the school. However, Elvira's colleagues' attempts to improve her behaviour turned out to be futile. [163] The story continued. Elvira vexed her mother-in-law and Liese thought, the Lord gave me this burden; I have to accept my lot. Hans kept silent as if he would like to take revenge on his mother for his incompetent upbringing. The innocent Liese had to suffer from this torture for seven or eight years. Liese then met a man named Fast, a widower who lived in a far-off village. He lived together with his son, whose family consisted of seven or eight children. He was a lay preacher, and by chance he worked for the community to which Liese belonged. He asked Liese to marry him. Elvira sent her away to this man who wanted to marry her. Liese said that it was God's will, and so she was content with the marriage, but I don't know whether she was really very happy. Yet she did say that she had a good life with all the children who lived at their house. My sister lived there for ten years until her husband got cancer, suffered for a long time, and eventually died. Liese took care of him while he was sick. Even though she had a big family back then, she later thought that she had a peaceful and enjoyable time. She was now a widow again, but she stayed with Fast's family for a while until they needed more space as the children grew. Indeed, Liese had a good time with them. I have visited her there, and without doubt, it was a friendly family.

In the meantime, Liese's own family also underwent changes. The two oldest grandsons went to university and moved to a city far away from their parents' home. Hans got tired of Elvira, who was permanently scolding him at home and school. He simply left Elvira and moved in with one of his former students who could afford her own apartment in Chelyabinsk. She was expecting a child from Hans. It was not difficult for him to start a new family. In this way, Liese had to experience how her only son, whom she had loved and coddled, had left his own family behind to establish a new family with a young Russian woman. However, from the very beginning, it was not easy for them. Both Hans and his

young wife needed to work. They also had a young daughter. Hans then brought his mother from the small kolkhoz village in Altai Krai to his new family in Chelyabinsk. Hans' young wife, whose name was Katja, received her kindly. Liese immediately began to take care of her small granddaughter. Afterwards, the couple had a second daughter, so that Liese found a new occupation. For Katja, Liese only took care of girls, whereas she had helped Elvira with the upbringing of boys. Indeed, Liese wished to have many children, but at least she had been responsible for many children. Her wish was strangely realized but with a high price. She had surely not dreamed about such a family life. Nevertheless, she had to put a good face on the matter. There was no escape.

[163] Liese still lives with them and is now seventy-nine years old. She enjoys good health even with a feeble body since childhood. She inherited her mother's strong heart. In addition to this, she was always busy with physically demanding work. From childhood until today she has been childish, naïve, and religious. She even became a fanatic in later life. As a result, she was often confronted with difficulties. Yet I do not claim that she has never been carefree. She sometimes acted according to her whims, a learned behaviour. Her household always enjoyed relative prosperity because of her good financial management. She was eager to give a hand but she did not understand when her help was not appreciated. She would have been able to become a true American who knows how to make use of her fortune. She never asked her sons or her husband to help her at home. She preferred to do it alone. I am not sure whether this can be considered a strength of character.

At the present, she is quite constrained while spending her last years with her son. She does not need to do anything. She is also not allowed to do some things since what she used to deem to be important and valuable doesn't matter anymore. She should stay calm and do nothing so that she does not do anything wrong or disturb anyone. That is a heavy lot for our hard-working sister who always had something to do without even looking for it. Liese's ideals, and her struggle for implementing them were not immoral. She did not employ unethical means to materialize her wishes. Despite her kindness and religious devotion, she experienced unpredictable calamities more than once. I think she was the sibling who failed the most at achieving her ideals. Her goals remained unfulfilled as much as she was successful at practicing modesty and contentment. How does Liese's life confirm the principle of righteous retaliation? What did my father think about Liese when he said that he was most sorry for Liese? Do I know her well enough? Do I still not understand who she is? I can ponder about it as much as I like but cannot grasp it. I can only repeat that a poet once said that the reason for all tears remains secret on earth; however, you will know God's will after you've entered heaven.

Today is 29 December 1993. After several years, I want to add an account of the last years of my sister. I wrote that Liese spent the last years of her life with the second family of her son Johann. Even though she had everything she needed, the way she lived was very different from what she wanted. She would soon die peacefully, as people used to say. D.... [*text abruptly ends here*] [164] Indeed, Liese's life turned out to be very different from her expectations. My sister moved to her son, who lived in Chelyabinsk after the death of her husband, D. Fast. She took care of the two daughters of his second marriage there. The modesty of my sister made her more or less content with her lot, but she also had no alternative. It was not easy for her to accept her living situation, considering her morals.

However, her main struggle, which became torture for her, was that she now lived in a Russian family. There was nothing German—no German language, manners, upbringing, or so forth. She suffered from this. Her son already stopped taking her worries seriously. He was not capable of understanding his mother. Yet, God will help soon, when the suffering has reached its peak, as I have already said.

Gerhard was forced to leave the Caucasus together with his family with whom he had lived.

He then decided to move to the Altai Krai in Siberia. He settled down in Slavgorod in the same region where my sister had spent many happy years with her second husband, D. Fast, and his family. My brother was able to purchase a house there. Fortunately, there was a room there in which Liese could live. Without hesitation, Liese moved from Chelyabinsk, where her son lived, to Gerhard's place. He lived together with his daughter Lene and her child, Gerhard's granddaughter. Liese now lived where she knew many people, including the family of her second husband, D. Fast. Everyone was happy about this change, Gerhard, the Fast family, and especially my sister. She was able to spend many joyful and merry years in Slavgorod. The Fast family often visited her and supplied her with food. She had a good life at Gerhard's home. She lived in a German family and environment. There was even a German-speaking church community in Slavgorod, and she liked that.

She was happy about her life. But events turned in a new direction. After the emigration wave of ethnic Germans had reached Slavgorod, the entire Fast family left Slavgorod. This family then asked Gerhard and Liese to immigrate to Germany, too.

On the 20 July 1993, Gerhard arrived together with his son Gerhard, and Elvira, whom we invited to come to Germany, in Friedland. Three families came at once: Gerhard, his son, who had the same name, Elvira, Gerhard's daughter, and her son and children. They got an emergency apartment in Münster where they now live. Everyone who knows a member of this large family visits and tries to help them as much as they can.

Now it has to be said that there is a downside to everything. That is a law of nature. [164] Gerhard is now ninety years old. He can hardly move anymore, and his mental abilities have diminished. He is giving his son and Elvira a hard time. His daughter, Lena, and her five-person family are also experiencing a hard time because they did not speak any German making them quite helpless. Liese arrived as a sick woman. She was now completely confined to bed with cancer that had reached its final stage. She had internal metastasis on her neck and bones, and would die soon. Apart from prescribing her of pain-relieving medicines, the doctor could not help her. Despite her old age, she was mentally fit. She could still read, tell absolutely logical stories, and sing. Her case was exceptional! She could still eat, and partially help herself. Liese astonished the doctors and us. Medicines reduced her pain to a minimum.

In this way, my sister lived from her day of arrival in Germany until her death after six months. She died with full consciousness on her birthday on the 23 December, as she would have been eighty-eight years old. Her struggle was over! On 28 December, we buried her in a small family circle (the Fast family and the Bartels family with me) in the graveyard

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of the St. Martin's Church in Münster. We passed her on into the soil of the homeland. We used to have a very beloved sister called Elisabeth but now she is dead. Her story has come to an end!

Rest in peace, my dear sister!
God rest her soul!

She could not expect her only son, Johann Dyck, to attend her funeral. She did not even receive a letter from him. He lived with his second wife in Chelyabinsk in Russia. He is divorced from his first wife Elvira, née Simon. The three sons he had with Elvira visited Liese to say goodbye to her before she emigrated from Slavgorod. They are good boys. They are married and went to university. Liese's son did not come to her farewell. Yet I do remember that Liese received a photo from the wedding of his oldest daughter that he had sent.

ELVIRA

[165] My sister Elvira was born on 16 March 1912 in Nordheim. I can remember her from the time she was being weaned. And what a big fuss my little sister made. As far as I can remember, she was an eccentric person her entire life. She could be in a bad mood and criticize you. And then she could suddenly become lovely and friendly.

Elvira spent an untroubled childhood at home. Thankfully, she didn't understand all the events that occurred in the world, or in our family from 1913 to 1922. All the other family members were affected by those events to varying degrees. Elvira began to go to school from 1921-1922, and she finished it from 1924-1925. She was a good student who learnt with ease. Her teacher for four years was Gerhard Neufeld. Ella, as we used to call her, was attending school, and in her teenage years, at a time when our economic situation was improving after years of hardship. During this time, the number of family members who lived at my parents' home was decreasing. By the end, we were only four people: mother, father, Elvira, and me. It became quieter at home as the other siblings had moved out. The years before the autumn of 1929 were the best times Elvira ever had. I think she had fond memories from those years.

In the autumn of 1929, we all were involved in the fateful emigration wave when we had to return from Moscow to our home village since we had not been allowed to emigrate.

After our home was destroyed in 1931, and my parents had gone to exile, my sister lived at Liese's home until 1933 or 1934. Then she married Nikolai Penner, an orphan from Molotschna. Nikolai was a quiet and hardworking cattleman. Elvira moved with him to his home, where we visited her in 1938. They had three girls when they visited us in Rutschenkovo-Stalino. This was how my parents got to know the children of her youngest daughter. After my father had passed away, my mother spent some time living at Elvira's home. Elvira's family developed normally living in harmony and peace. Both Elvira and

her husband worked at a kolkhoz, where they earned enough to have a decent life. Her children were normal and healthy.

My sister Ella was short, in fact, she was the smallest member of my family. She looked like my mother. She was chubby and small, but she was also hard working and knew how to deal with money. She kept her home and daughter in order. After she had become a mother, she ceased to be so moody, being lovely and friendly to people. She collected several songs, sayings and poems during her youth. She was an unbelievable singer, and guitarist. She also taught her children to play the guitar. Overall, Ella was a happy person, and everyone liked her.

[166] In 1941, when the war broke out. Nikolai was one first who was forced to join the Labour Army. We did not know where he went, and never heard from him again.

A long time later, we learned that Elvira was deported to Kazakhstan with many other ethnic Germans. A distant relative told my mother what had happened to them there having witnessed the terrible tragedy. He knew my sister very well and was eager to find her family. Finally, finding my mother, he reported the fate of her daughter. The conversation took place some years after the tragedy when the male family members were serving in the Labour Army.

In 1943, hunger was everywhere. Everyone struggled to survive as best as they could. During spring, the food supply had become more difficult. The kolkhoz had to give all their food to the army so had no food for their own workers. The local population had some supplies, but the recently arrived deportees had nothing. After the sun had melted the snow on the fields in spring, many hungry people, who had hardly eaten anything, went to the stubble field to gather corn that had been covered by the early snow the previous autumn. The hungry ignored the fact that corn covered by snow might become poisonous if it was not entirely frozen. It is possible that some people were saved from starvation by this corn. Yet, others died because of it. My sister was among them. The man told my mother that he had found the dead bodies of Elvira and her daughters on the field. She had been holding her youngest daughter in her arms. They all had died at once because from hunger, or more probably, from eating poisonous corn. We never heard from the father. In this way, all members of the family had lost their lives during the war, being in the prime of their life.

We survivors had no idea where Elvira had gone and how she was doing. I bow my head and shed tears in pity, and grief when I remember our small Elvira.

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Liese, Gerhard, Tina, Maria, David, Peter, Elvira TOEWS (no date)

PART 2—Go into the blaze again!¹

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

[157] My name is David Toews. I was born on 4 June 1909 (or 22 May old calendar) in Nordheim (later Marinovka, then Marynivka). Nordheim was a high situated village consisting of 32 farmsteads. The village belonged to the Memrik settlement founded in the area of Yuzovka (later Stalino, then Donetsk). The land of the Memrik settlement is located about 150 kilometres north of the city of Mariupol situated on the coast of the Sea of Azov. My father was seventeen years old, as the settlement was established. He moved to Memrik from its mother colony, the Molotschna settlement, located about 150 kilometres west of Memrik's fields. Father was a half-bearded, two-metre-tall man. He was strong. My father had physical strength, a strict and resolute character, determination, and zeal. He also had compassion for his family. He was full of diligence and solidarity with anyone in need. My mother stood in stark contrast to my father. She was only 148 centimetres tall, and had difficulty walking. She struggled with her eyesight as long as I knew her. She didn't always have sight problems, but she always had a disability in walking. She began to lose her sight when she was pregnant with me. Mother possessed an exceptionally strong heart, possibly because of her small body, which was less demanding than my father's. As a result, mother felt vital even in old age. This helped her to always remain optimistic. She never lost her strength. She looked forward to the future, full of hope. I have already explained how my parents got married despite their difference, and that they had an exemplary marriage. This certainly had a positive impact on the relationship between them as parents, and on their children. It also rubbed off on relationships among us siblings.

Our parents had 12 children (five boys and seven girls). Two of them died in infancy (Liese and David). After the first Liese had passed away, and Gerhard had been born, they had a second Liese, who still lives in Russia. Likewise, I was immediately born as the second David after the first David had passed away. Their last and twelfth child, Elvira (or Ella), came into the world after me. My parents had twelve children in total and raised ten of them until they each established their own families. Indeed, my parents were blessed

¹ Quote from J. Toews' poem "*Im Schmelztigel*." See [76].

with a large family. None of their children had such large families. I was born at the height of my parents' prosperity. My father had been an orphan when he had immigrated to Nordheim, and worked ten years for his brother. Then he had decided to establish his own family leaving his brother's home with an old workbench, the most necessary carpenter tools, and some very poor clothing. He married a small woman who had difficulties walking, whose parents were only able to build a small house, and who were not able to provide her with a proper dowry. (See "Our Parents.")

Early Childhood

[158] My early childhood began at the time when my father had recovered from a severe lung disease caused by working as a tradesman. He had obtained his own house, farmstead and 30 *desiatinas*¹ of land. In addition to this, my parents had my grandmother's farmstead of the same size. Turning from trade to farming made prosperity possible. One result was my father's decision to purchase a steam mill, a decision that would harm him. However, my father bought the mill, and so he had to take care of it besides the 60 *desiatinas*. In the meantime, my grandmother buried her second husband, David Dörksen, and had married for the third time. She lived together with grandfather Martens 150 kilometres from us in Zagradovka. My sister, Anna, had grown into an adult, and had left our parents' home to study at the deaconess' institute in Muntau, Molotschna settlement. Likewise, sister Sara went to a girls' high school to become a teacher. She surely had talent for that enabling her to fulfil her father's wish. My brother Peter also sparked my father's hope at that time. Before this, my father's effort to support him were futile because Peter had been unable to seriously commit to anything. However, it now seemed that Peter was at least somewhat interested in becoming a miller. Peter's interest was one of the main reasons why father had purchased the mill. Peter was the first of the children to live at the mill's location. Jakob Dörksen would have taken care of Peter, and would have helped him to become a miller. Jakob was the youngest son of the eldest Jakob Dörksen, a member of the local Mennonite Brethren Church my parents had joined. He lived in our home village across the street from our house. The younger Jakob Dörksen would have been a good mentor to Peter. My parents later told us how happy and optimistic they had been thinking that Peter had a good guide. In this way, Peter moved to the small miller's home and Supervisor Dörksen lived together with his family of four children in the bigger house attached to the mill. Peter Friesen, Jakob Dörksen's brother-in-law, also settled there as the bookkeeper and manager. He did not have children. Meanwhile, Maria still lived at home after being finished with school. At that time, she was not ready to start a life on her own because of her unstable physical health. She would have become lonely or bored without having a stable occupation. So, my parents decided to have Maria live with Peter for a short time so that she could run his household in Borissovo. Peter could not even have provided himself with food and beverage in the long run. But my parents were deceived. Their decision would evolve into a tragedy for their children, and would make our parents suffer a harmful ethical defeat seldom experienced by caring parents. These negative consequences were carried by our entire family and beyond. Peter and Maria's carelessness

¹ Half-size farms were 30 *desiatinas* (81 acres or 32.76 hectares).

as well as my parents' trust in them led to a painful disaster. My parents never completely recovered from it. [159]. My sibling and I took varying degrees of time to come terms with this catastrophe. I have already reported about this elsewhere. (See Brother Peter and Sister Maria). At about the same time, brother Hans and sister Tina also left our village. They were successfully graduated by the teacher, Gerhard Berger. The school building was close to our home. You just needed to pass the hedge of our neighbours, and a small front garden. I have a distant memory that the speedy Tina ran from the footbridge of the school to our door crying out cheerfully, "I passed the final examination!" Our parents, someone else, and I celebrated together with her. In the next school year, brother Hans went to Kronstadt to our relative, the Pauls', to attend the Central School.

I have said everything I could say about my early childhood from 1912 to 1914, as I was three to four years old. The preceding chapters of my memoir have recorded how things had developed at my parents' home during this time. I have the impression that events followed more or less a logical order until then. My parents never enjoyed an easy life, but they were able to succeed according to their material and physical abilities. They were able to establish a family with many children, and to preserve their wealth successfully because of their zeal, industriousness and thrift. They were always full of hope, and never complained or lost heart. They trusted God and had an honourable life. My parents had a reputation beyond our home village because of their artisanship: father as a carpenter, and my grandfather as a blacksmith. Furthermore, our community needed my grandmother and my mother. Grandmother was a midwife, and my mother was good at tailoring. Everyone asked them for help, and also then received it, my father served as village administrator for many years because of his strict, honest, trustworthy and consistent behaviour. Likewise, my parents were reliable regarding in religion. They were active participants in the Mennonite Brethren community. They had a religious lifestyle, and successfully influenced us children. We were raised under strict orders and instructions. In short, it was reasonable that my parents were rightly proud of their home, and family.

However, things began to get complicated with my parents after I turned four. Providence had prepared one surprise after the other. Only a few were positive; most turned out to be harmful. It sometimes looked like a collapse for my parents. Since age four, I often saw my mother crying. When she noticed that I saw her crying, she often tried to wipe her tears away, or hide herself to spare us her grief. This did not often work. Neither did we believe her when she tried to convince us that she was crying because of her eye condition.[160] Later on, we debated about the cause and the effect without coming to any conclusion. We often asked ourselves, did mother's tears cause her eye disease? Or did the eye disease make her shed tears? Although we children simply had to accept that mother cried a lot, and suffered from an eye disease at the same time. We continually wrestled with these questions. Our elder siblings eventually told us that my father used to be very different before these troubled years. I remember him being serious most of the time during my childhood. He was only friendly to us when he was happy about something specific. Without doubt, he rarely laughed. It took many years before father's behaviour changed for the better.

I can vividly remember spending time on the farmstead with the mill. I don't remember how I got there. We might have taken the train or the carriage. I met Jakob Dörksen's children there. Tina refused to play around with us little boys—her younger brother, Jakob, and me, both being the same age. She was the oldest of us. In my eyes, she was a big girl. Neta, who was probably nine years old back then, also enjoyed playing with us. We gathered cherries together. We boys could only be envious of Tina, who climbed to the highest treetops in order to pick the best cherries. Neta was also good at climbing trees, whereas Jakob and me could only gather cherries that had fallen to the ground. When we were bored with this, we pursued a different entertaining activity by going to the mill where we climbed to the attic, and jumped down into a pile of bran in the store room. After we were tired of this, we returned to the farm. When my sister Maria saw us, we were in trouble since it took some effort to remove the dusty flour from our clothing. Then we had to hear her unkind words. But she couldn't make us stop playing, because we enjoyed it too much. Besides this, we could rely on the support of Jakob's father. He protected us when Maria was too harsh since he understood about being a boy better than she did. We had utmost respect for the boilerman, who was in charge of the steamer. He stared at us with his blank eyes and white teeth radiating from his dark face, and pretended to chase after us. We ran away as fast as we could.

I also remember the wedding of my sister Anna that took place in our lateral barn. Cornelius Paul was bored, and sat on his carriage behind the barn. The dinner served consisted of a traditional set meal, including boiled ham, plum and raisin jam, and cinnamon-spiced rice. After the wedding, as he and my mother discussed the festivity, I heard father say that five pud¹ had been consumed. Nevertheless, my parents were very happy about the wedding. Everything went according to plan, and our parents were, indeed, very happy about it. Also, my sister Anna did find any fault with her wedding. We can say retrospectively that my parents were able to support the wedding of their oldest daughter the most. No other daughter could receive such support because of the declining material conditions of my parents. [161] There is no reason to believe that my parents preferred their oldest daughter over the others. After she had made good in Canada, I am not sure whether Anna ever considered how she benefited from the privileged position she had at home as the oldest daughter bearing mother's name. I wrote down my memories of Anna. You can learn more about her there. However, I want to add something about Anna here. I do not think that Anna would have contradicted Christian ethics to which she adhered, or neglected her duty as a deaconess by sending a small sugar package to my parents and especially to her mother, whose name she bore, after my parents were deported to Siberia. This way, my mother could have at least sweetened her bitter chicory (a coffee substitute) on some Sundays or at Christmas. A milk tin wouldn't have been a bad thing either. My mother, Anna, and her daughter, Anna, had different ideas about being Christian. Right now, I am reminded of what a preacher said here in Germany (at the Palmengarten), "It doesn't cost anything to become a Christian, but it takes a lot of effort to be a Christian." More later. Let us return to my happy childhood days.

I want to tell you about something that happened in the summer. After her second husband, D. Dörksen, had passed away, my widowed grandmother lived in the big room

¹ *Written in the margin:* 80 kilograms

of my parents' home. We all ran to the front door when the postman arrived between breakfast and lunchtime. He carried a large parcel addressed to grandmother, brought it into the house, laid it on the table and said, "Be careful! Do not throw it." Unsurprisingly, I needed to stand close to the table, and, full of curiosity, I could hardly wait until the lid was removed. First sight was of long, fine, white wood shavings. Then, grandmother lifted out something from the packing. It was a wall clock with a big white dial and black Roman numerals indicating the hours. A long shiny pendulum—like a mirror—was attached to the clock. Peter fixed the clock on the wall of my grandmother's room so that she could look at the dial while lying in bed. It chimed out the hours, and we all cherished it. Having a clock boosted our prestige!

I was grandmother's favourite. She often gave me sweets. I was the sibling who was allowed to enter grandmother's room most often. But now I started visiting grandmother even more frequently since I enjoyed looking at the clock over and over again. I was only forbidden to touch the pendulum. Grandmother took charge of winding the clock with its long chains and glittering weights.

[162] Not every member of our household had a good time when we got the wall clock. My little sister, Elvira, had a very different view of this event. She had a bad time on this day, and she even experienced grief. She was about one year old at that time. I stood very close to grandmother while she unpacked the valuable parcel. Mother sat on a stool, not far away from the stove. Elvira was giggling, sitting on mother's lap. Elvira touched the breasts of her mother. She wanted to be nursed as she usually had done some days before. Now this was supposed to change as Elvira was being weaned from her mother's breast. Mother said that today was the decisive day. One of them would surrender, while the other would win. Although they liked each other, and had done a lot of good things for each other, they now had opposing interests. Mother immediately ended the duel quickly not risking a trial of strength: my mother hit Elvira's soft spot that fitted her intention the most. She then put Elvira on the high chair, from which Elvira was unable to fall, and went to the bedroom. She prepared Elvira's bedding there. The clock in the neighbouring room struck twelve times. I had followed my mother since I thought she was angry. However, she then turned to me, and lifted me up. She kissed me and said, "Indeed, Widja," (that was my nickname) "if the clock strikes 12, the course of many things will change. Go and spend some time with Ella! You can hear how much she is crying!" I went to play with my little upset sister, intending to distract Elvira, but without success. My father suddenly stood at the door frame and asked, "What is going on?" After I told him what had happened, he took his little daughter in his arms, wiped off her tears, and soothed her. Elvira calmed down. Afterwards, he gave her a small piece of sugar, and took her to the bedroom. He put Elvira into her bed, and said to me, "Close the shutter! Elvira will fall asleep soon!" My mother went to the big living room through the side door so that Elvira couldn't see her. Elvira immediately fell asleep, tired from her tears. Without delay, I then related to my father the piece of news that grandmother had received a clock in the mail. The clock would indicate the time with a chime, and was hanging in the big living room. We—grandmother, father, mother and I—stood and enjoyed looking at the splendid clock. We watched the long swaying pendulum with the round plate like the moon. The plate moved regularly from left to right, and from right to left according to the rhythm of the clock.

My father told me, “Listen carefully! The clock is limping, isn’t she?” I did not understand what he meant. I asked him, “Can a clock limp?” My father replied to me, “It’s an old expression. However, can’t you hear that one tick is shorter than the other. Listen carefully.” He then climbed on a stool and pushed the clock just a little bit. Afterwards, the clock sounded slightly different: the tick and tock were at the same rate. I could tell the difference. Then Father said, “We have to push the hand forward. The clock is a little bit slow.” He drew his watch out of his vest pocket. He then announced, “It is exactly one o’clock.” Upon this, the clock struck once. I cheered about this. Indeed, we all were happy about it. My mother had her own announcement, “It is now time to go to the table.” That was an eventful morning for sure!

The Clock Struck Twelve

[163] What did Mother say? She said, “When the clock strikes 12, the course of many things will change.” Yes, that’s what she said. From my child’s viewpoint, I thought she had just spoken about Elvira’s life. But actually, my parents’ clock had struck 12. My parents’ lives, as well as the lives of all members of our household were in for a dramatic change. While Elvira, being weaned, was doubting her mother’s affection, since she could not understand what mother had done to her, a much, much greater misfortune was developing. My father went to the mill to visit Peter and Maria, and gave some last orders to Dörksen and Friesen. Then he travelled to Ekaterinoslav, the provincial capital back then, in order to clarify issues related to the mortgage on the mill. Afterwards, he returned home. Now when my father returned from his frequent travel, we who stayed home happily anticipated his interesting stories. We listened carefully and attentively as he told them to us. That happened this time too. But since it was late, the whole household was already in bed. As the saying goes, the targeted victims are sleeping peacefully, while the devils are doing evil things. While our entire house was sleeping, the mill had been set on fire. At the same time, our big wall clock struck 12 times as usual. You can read about what had happened to the mill in the chapter “Our Parents.” The only thing that I understood as a child was that we did not have a mill anymore. Obviously, I wasn’t aware of the far-reaching consequences that the event had for my family, but would realize them later. I would understand more and more in the course of the years. In any case, this fateful misfortune was the first in a series of terrible events. It meant the beginning of a time characterized by hardship and austerity. Upon this devastating news, my father immediately went to Borissovo. He returned with Peter and Maria in a two-horse carriage loaded with their things. My mother and father’s nervous weeping made a deep impression on me during these days. I was only three or four years old. For Hans, this misfortune meant he had to give up studying at the Central School, while Tina was not able to study medicine anymore. My sister Sara, who had undertaken the first steps to become a teacher, returned home. Everyone was home again, apart from Anna who had travelled to Molotschna. How many hopes were dashed? How much suffering? However, more misfortunes awaited us.

The Second and Worst Misfortune

[164] Our parents were not superstitious at all. Nevertheless, my mother sometimes said, "Misfortunes never come singly." After the second misfortune, one more severe than the mill burning, my parents, and our entire family suffered much stress. Obviously, I was too inexperienced to notice the looming disaster. However, my mother saw more than the other family members, even though her eyes hurt at that time. The peace of my childhood was disrupted by a loud conversation that took place in my parents' bedroom. Then I heard a clapping sound, and my sister Maria began to howl. I do not remember where my other siblings were, but one was in the children's room with me. We were not allowed to leave the room. My father walked through the house with big, heavy steps, took Peter by the scruff of the neck, and marched him out to the barn. He battered Peter there without mercy. None of us had seen it, but we had been able to hear it, and later we saw what Peter looked like. I still can't imagine what my parents thought at that time. I only believe they hadn't been careful enough in their decision to allow Peter and Maria to live under the same roof at Borissovo.

I did not know what our parents' plans had been, but certainly, plans changed. I was told little, and couldn't understand what was happening around me. I only understood the complete situation later after piecing together information over the course of years.

One day, Anna returned home, too. I was told that my brother-in-law, Johann Ediger, had gone to war to take care of injured soldiers. I was not able to comprehend this. I surely noticed that Anna was very often upset, and bad-tempered while she wandered around the house. She also started arguments over trifles with her siblings. Elvira and I especially suffered from Anna's bad temper. We both loved and respected our oldest sister. However, we both got the impression that our efforts to be well behaved were frequently ill-rewarded. Indeed, we often had to accept penalties we did not deserve. Anna's appearance began to change. It appeared to me that she had gained weight. She also looked less beautiful. I assumed that I felt this way because my naive love for her was being replaced by a mixture of fear, discomfort, and aversion. However, one day, Elvira and I jumped over Anna's broom (or something similar) by mistake, so she scolded and penalized us. My father then intervened. Later, we felt pity for her as she sat crying at the window in the corner room. I wrote about the other things I remember in the chapter dedicated to Anna. We only rarely received news about her from Canada. I cannot remember that she wrote letters to her siblings. I am aware that Anna had a tough time in Canada, especially after her husband's death. I can also imagine that her four children caused her worries. [165] I recall a proverb my mother used to quote when there were conversations about the relationships between children, parents, and biological or spiritual siblings "Parents prepare their children for the world, but the children prepare their parents for heaven." We often discussed this subject. I remember that Anna made an impression on us. Provided that her children contributed to Anna's spiritual development, too, we can assume that Anna died at peace.

After Anna returned home to Molotschna with her husband, my parents received a letter from the Ediger family. The letter informed my parents that Anna had given birth to a son named Johann. When the son knew how to walk, Anna brought him to visit us. I can vividly remember how we played and horsed around in the courtyard and in the garden with this

sensitive boy. We needed to treat Johann carefully so that he did not cry. When he got chicken droppings between his toes (we always walked barefoot), he would cry bloody murder. Anna would rush to him immediately. He'd lift up his foot as if bitten by a crab while he bawled. Meanwhile, we were dying of laughter. Anna then scolded us as if we were the biggest criminals while she washed up her boy. We understood that it must have been terrible for the boy that he had wet chicken dirt between his toes. However, it was not our fault. Such was farm life.

I remember one incident very vividly. We played on the courtyard during lunchtime. Ella and I went to the edge of the farmyard where we played with our toys. Anna then brought her boy outside, pointed at us, and said, "Go over there! Look, they are playing." Anna immediately turned around and went back inside. We didn't pay any attention, and suddenly Hänschen [*diminutive of Johann*] started yelling. We saw that he had fallen on the ground. Anna already arrived and began to scream. We stood a little bit away from Hänschen, and didn't know what was going on. We just stood in our place while Anna grabbed the boy, lifted him up, and held him out as far as possible. Then we saw the cow manure. What a terrible mess! Then we laughed for a long time. That confirms the adage, "Those who have suffered damage should at least avoid being mocked!"

[166] Let us now return to Maria's misfortune. In 1913, after Anna and her husband moved to their new home, we youngest siblings were brought to my Uncle Peter's. To be more precise, we were brought to Aunt Maria's since my father's only brother, Peter, had already died. We had to stay there for the night. That had never happened before. Anyway, Maria (she was, indeed, a kind-hearted woman) wanted us to stay for the night. We weren't unhappy. When we returned home the following day, we found a new brother. Also, my sister Maria was not at home. She had become a "guest" somewhere else. But Anna returned home to replace her. We did not have any objection to that. Later, we welcomed a new important guest.

Uncle Eck from Turkestan

This important guest was Uncle Eck from Central Asia (Turkestan¹ in those days). I remember him as a thick, bald, and friendly, child-loving man. He did not stay with us long. He soon drove back taking Sara and Maria with him. We now had a younger brother who was named Nikolai. My mother, Sara and Tina took care of him. We played with the boy. However, I wondered from that first day why mother did not breastfeed the child. I knew that babies were usually breastfed because of my little sister Elvira. Why this difference? My questions remained unanswered. When Maria sent Nikolai a package with a small toy horse, I sensed that he was not really my brother, but my nephew. It was all too apparent that he was Maria's son. Then I only needed to discover who the father of my nephew was. However, that secret was revealed when Maria returned from Turkestan in 1915.

¹ Turkestan was the Russian administrative zone east of the Aral Sea.

Sara remained in Central Asia and when she did visit home again, she brought a son who by that time was two or three years old. She had married a Russian man, Kasansky, from Moscow. When Sara informed our parents about her situation, my parents were very disappointed. But my parents' anger did not change anything. You can read about Sara and Maria in their own chapters. I never heard anything about Uncle Eck. My parents had asked Mother's relative by the name of Thielmann, who lived in Central Asia (Talas), to take care of their daughters. Thielmann had introduced them to Uncle Eck.

The Outbreak of the German-Russian War

Our farmstead ceased to prosper when we had to take on debt after the mill burned. The entire family had to fight to pay the debt, and hold on to our farmstead and home. When the war between German and Russian began in 1914 evolving into a world war, Peter was conscripted to the labour army. He was in the forestry unit, but after he injured his leg, he returned home. Hans served as a medic. Many difficulties caused by the war had to be overcome. I remember well [167] how H. Hildebrand, D. Balzer, H. Unger, Ger. Rogalsky, and other men sat together in our dining room to prepare parcels for the soldiers at the front. These parcels contained sugar and tobacco, for instance. The housewives knitted socks and gloves. My father, serving as a village administrator, was very busy. Some of the Russian population were discontent due to the fact that young German men didn't have to serve in the army, a privilege granted to Germans by contract with the Imperial Russian government. The Russian historian Krestyaninov¹ describes in his book "The Mennonites" that the Russian landowners submitted a petition to Czar Nicholas in which they requested him to forbid Germans to acquire more land. They argued that the Germans had threatened the local population because they had been expanding their agriculture resulting in increased land purchases.

(This was the same problem that Mennonites had had in Poland 150 years previously. When the Mennonites emigrated from Germany to Poland, the Polish Empire welcomed them because of their agricultural expertise. However, the Poles were afraid that the Germans would harm their fellow countrymen 200 years later, since the Germans were expanding their land. In about 1780, the Germans were expelled from Poland. They immigrated to Russian, following the invitation of Czarina Catherine II.)²

¹ B. F. Krestyaninov's book was published by the Soviet government in the 1960s. It has been characterized as "filled with half-truth, misrepresentation, and seriously garbled interpretation" by Mennonite historians.

² The history recounted here is more properly described as Dutch immigration to the Vistula River delta in the 1500s to reclaim the inundated land as they had been doing on the North Sea coast. Mennonites were not expelled from Poland, as that area was then part of the German state of Prussia. They chose immigration to Russia in the 1760s rather than conscription into the Prussian military, or the payment of fines levied for non-involvement.

In 1915 Czar Nicholas signed a decree that Mennonites had to resettle in the east.¹ The people in our area got upset upon learning of this. It was announced that important news was to be made public on the next Sunday, so children were not allowed to attend the meeting. I remember how desperate our parents were as they returned from Kotlyarevka on Sunday (the Mennonite Brethren church building for Memrik was there). However, the news was later spread at Bible studies frequented by children. The following day, my father said during our morning prayer, "If things continue like that, we will move to Germany, since we belong to Germany." At that time, I was six years old. I paid close attention to the word of my father. Later, we continued to discuss Mennonites and religion at the table. My brother Hans and my sister Sara were also present. They were already allowed to engage in debates with my parents, while the younger siblings, including Gerhard and Liese, had to be quiet and listen. As a child, I was not able to comprehend many issues, but I remember one sentence my father uttered back then, "Those who are enjoying the wealth of a country, also need to share its burden." My father added to this, "We, Mennonites, are refusing to do this." I did not understand more about the peril that threatened us. However, I would soon learn about this through experience. My siblings, Gerhard and Liese, already went to school. I enjoyed being present at the big table in the dining room where they did their homework most of the time. [168] One day the police came to our village to shut down the school, and put a lock on the door. Classes were now illegal, and the entrance of the school was sealed so that no one could enter the school building anymore. Since Mennonite schools and the teachers' salaries were financed by the village government,² all teachers had to resign, and leave the teachers' apartments in the school. German children were not allowed to go to school anymore.

The Mennonite community now founded a school that needed to be hidden from the Russian administration. This school had two classes. One class was offered to older students so that they could advance their learning a bit. Hans and Tina took care of this class in our summer parlour. Maria, who had returned from Turkestan, was in charge of the class offered to the children just starting school. I attended Maria's class at age six years in my first school year, 1915 to 1916. I well remember how I wrote the numbers of the year "1916" for the first time while sitting on a yellow-painted window seat in our children's room. I proudly showed my writing to my parents. I can remember the content of the text that headlined "1916."

During the first months of my first school year, Hans and Johann Isaak, who were the same age, voluntarily served as medics in the Russian army. As a result, the class that he taught in our summer parlour was dissolved. Meanwhile, our beginner class carried on. Many times, we had to disperse quickly and run home through the gardens as fast as we could whenever we saw a rider on the road coming from the neighbouring Russian village Seladovka, the administrative centre having authority over our village. We had to suspect any rider we saw might be police (*Straschnik*). It is impossible to imagine that would have happened if the police had become aware of our school. There was no school from 1916 to

¹ On 2 February 1915 the Czar issued a decree liquidating all property of Russian subjects of Austrian, Hungarian and German descent. The War and Revolution prevented its full implementation.

² David adds that his father was the village administrator.

1917. We German-speaking Russians, especially the Mennonites, felt uncertain and anxious about the future.

Hans served in Moscow, but he sometimes returned home for an impromptu visit. Then he and father discussed how the war was going for Russia. Hans told father that there was a lot of unrest among soldiers. The general population was dissatisfied with the situation. Meanwhile, the war went on, with successes, not for the Russian army, but for the German armies who occupied more and more Russian territory.

In 15 March 1917, Czar Nicholas was forced to resign. Alexander Kerensky presided over the government. Then something happened that I still remember exactly. It was a sunny day before the harvest season. Our farm was ruined to the degree that we decided not to use a reaper-binder or a threshing machine. Instead, we would use a reel reaper, and we would thresh with a threshing stone. Father had to arrange things and pick up the machines lent out to a neighbouring village. Father had driven somewhere and we were horsing around. [169] Then we noticed that adults and children from our neighbourhood were gathering on the street. Everything seemed to be quiet around our village. What had happened? As we went to the street, we heard a strange rattling noise. We then looked along the road and saw a convoy driving down to our village. The convoy approached our village at a footpace, and we caught sight of loads on heavy duty wagons and pairs driving into our village. The convoy arrived at the centre of the village. The wagons were put in a row across the street from walkway to walkway. All horses had very short tails as if they had been chopped off. Two to three soldiers who sat on each wagon steered the horses. All the wagons were really loaded. The soldiers were armed with rifles. Armed riders rode beside the carriages, probably in order to protect the convoy. We soon found out that these riders were officers. The soldiers spoke German, but they were hardly understandable, but the officers spoke a very good German. Our barn, empty with preparation for the harvest was soon occupied by the officers' horses, which the soldiers fed. Every horse was given a sack full of concentrated feed. It all appeared very strange to us. A group of officers went into our house and sat around the big table in our dining room. Soldiers brought different types of food into the kitchen. They were eager to help my mother and my sisters prepare food. A group of soldiers also sat around the long table in the summer dining room. They played cards, slapping down the next card. We were irritated by the behaviour that seemed so unusual to us.

A big room separated the summer kitchen from the stable. It contained a comfortable workshop and a baking oven on the courtyard side. A wall separated this room from another bigger one that we used for dining during summer. You could walk from the stable to the summer kitchen through this room, and vice versa. Here's where the boisterous soldiers played cards. Meanwhile, my mother limped through the kitchen, and, with my sisters, prepared a meal for the German soldiers and officers. We were keenly watching the card game. We had never seen anything like it. We enjoyed how the strangers, immersed in their game, celebrated the winner while they booed the loser. In short, it was unusual for us to see such an energetic game. We were never allowed to show such a degree of enthusiasm when we played. Certainly, we enjoyed playing a game, but such passion was forbidden! That's what we were taught, and besides, we never played cards at home. My parents didn't allow it since they thought that playing cards would evoke excessive emotion. We had

never seen playing cards before at our house since my parents even forbade hired farm hands to show or play cards. [170] My mother was very upset while working in the kitchen. She could not believe that there were cards in our home. Oh God! This had never happened before. What could she do about it? Those soldiers and officers were Germans. They introduced themselves as the occupying army that might be in power sometime. Therefore, it was probably better just to surrender.

However, my father had a different opinion. Father returned home while we were watching these events unfold. He quickly unhitched the wagon, and brought the horses into the stable, and he fed them. So, he overheard what was going on in the next room. Just as the card players were ready to cheer again, father appeared, a mighty figure in front of the big table. He thundered, "What is going on here? You are not allowed to play cards in my home." While the soldiers hesitated, my father took the arms of two soldiers and hastily marched them to the door. The others tried to explain while collecting the cards from the table. But father yelled again, "Get out! Playing cards is forbidden in my home." By then the last soldiers were already on the doorstep, but he called out again, "I don't want to see you playing cards in my house again!"

When he turned around two officers stood in front of him. Hearing all the noise, they had come into the room through the side door from our dining room. The officers asked severely, "What happened?" Father did not weaken, but with a hard voice, asked who they were. After they explained who they were, what had happened, and why they were here, father spoke to them as aggressively as he had spoken before to the soldiers, "Gentlemen, you are at the right address. Whoever you are, I rule over this house, and I inform you now that no one has ever played cards in my house. That won't change. Addition, I also preside over the village. I intend to follow your orders, but you need to direct your orders to me, as long as I am ruling over my home and this village. We need to maintain order." Then he went to the table with the officers, and asked them to stand to pray. Father gave thanks for the food, and asked everyone to sit down, and enjoy the meal. During the meal, important questions were addressed, and problems resolved, all diplomatically. This is how perfect order was maintained at home and in the village.

The soldiers then bought a pig from a farmer and slaughtered it. So, a happy pig-slaughtering feast took place. The soldiers began to sing. When they started to sing the song of the "Little Village Schoolmaster" they burst into laughter. The text of the song went like this:

A poor village schoolmaster once lived in a little village
The poor little schoolmaster
Used to spend half of the night in the light of a lamp
The poor little schoolmaster
Drove to the town to buy what he needed on Sunday
The poor little schoolmaster
Bought the half of a herring
Look at the poor little schoolmaster
How he laughed when a pig is slaughtered in the village,
The poor little schoolmaster

Memories of His Homeland

Needs to have the biggest sausage
Look at the poor little schoolmaster, how he is
Eating all the time when the village celebrates a wedding,
The poor little schoolmaster
Put what he cannot eat into his pocket,
The poor little schoolmaster . . .

There were still other verses I can remember. The soldiers' singing evoked extraordinary joy in us boys. [171] The German troops didn't stay with us very long, and soon left.

Kerensky couldn't hold onto power because of the influence of the Communist Party operating underground among the Russian population. Communist propaganda also caused uncertainty in the Imperial Russian Army. As a result, Kerensky's provisional government collapsed in autumn 1917. On 7 or 8 November (24 or 25 October old calendar), the October revolution broke out, led by Lenin's communists. People were incapable of anticipating the practical consequences that revolution would have for the Russian people, or to be more precise, for all the nations inside Russia. People wanted peace. They were tired of war. In March 1918, the new government concluded the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk. By it the Soviet government gained the support of the Russian people. They had made good their promise of bringing peace. Moreover, the Soviets promised to give land to Russian farmers, and they would soon get it. All nations who inhabited the vast Russian empire were happy about this, except the Germans, since they possessed land, and had not been much affected by the war. The new government, though, gifted the Germans by repealing Czar Nicholas' order to expel the Russians of German descent. All Germans in Russia were allowed to stay and maintain their businesses. The Germans now lived in peace again too. I was seven or eight years old and was hardly aware of how the events of these last years had changed our lives. We all stayed at home, and would continue to do that. My brother Hans, and the other couple of men who had not returned home, would come soon since the war was over. Without doubt, the older adult Germans could barely understand what had happened, or foresee the implications.

The Civil War and Its Consequences

Most Germans, including me, were aware of the immediate consequences of the new state of peace, and the revolution. Since the Czar did not rule us anymore, we Germans could maintain our business, and opened our schools again. I remember clearly how the locks were removed from our school's doors. The entire school building was cleaned, and new German teachers were sought and hired. Paul Koop became the teacher in our village, and moved into the apartment at the school. Meetings were held in the classrooms because it became difficult to drive to the assembly hall. Horses had lost weight, and the farmers were forced to reduce their numbers as well. The wedding of my brother Peter and Anna Born was the first one in Nordheim that was celebrated in the school building. We children were full of joy about that. We had a regular school year from 1917 to 1918. I mastered the materials for the second and third grades in one year. It was a great success for me and my entire family! [172] I had demonstrated to both my teachers and siblings that I really was a gifted boy! But I was also hardworking. According to the Mennonite custom, teacher

Koop was hired by the village itself, but he was barely known. The community had seized whoever presented themselves although whether these persons were really qualified to teach was unknown. It turned out that teacher Koop was not popular among the pupils or parents because of his nervousness, and other deficiencies, even though he had wonderful handwriting! So, a replacement was found in Gerhard Neufeld.

Mr. Neufeld was able to gain his pupils' love, and the trust of the village. He was both a friend of children, and a philanthropist. He was kind to his pupils, and trusted them but he could also be strict. His main virtue was his sense of justice. He treated everyone equally. Obviously, he taught his pupils how to read and write and made them familiar with arithmetic and geography. However, he also taught singing and playing. His entire being illustrated how a human should behave towards his fellow human, and how they should all interact. Gerhard Neufeld had a special talent for preparing and presenting evening school festivities with great success. All students were required to participate. Gerhard Neufeld's repertoire consisted of verses, proverbs, poems, and small pieces of prose, songs for solo and choir, dialogues, and dramatic scenes that involved more than two persons. He directed humorous, serious and tragic plays. Gerhard Neufeld liked singing the most. According to the parents, the school choir led by Gerhard Neufeld was the best the village of Nordheim had ever had. He practiced with both his pupils, and youth from the entire village. He carefully made all of us singers familiar with musical notation! Everyone whom Gerhard Neufeld taught notation was grateful for this. Unfortunately, he only worked at our school for a short period. After five or six years of teaching, he was not able to continue to work as a teacher because the political situation had changed dramatically with the ongoing effects of the October Revolution. He could not align his required work with his religious principles (which he firmly believed), and so quit school service.

In 1922, Gerhard Neufeld prepared and presented his last religious Christmas evening. It was my last one, too, because I had finished fifth grade, and would leave the village school. It was a wonderful evening for which we had prepared several poems and dialogues with two or more persons. A four-part school choir performed many Christmas songs, for example: *Fest aller heiligen Fest*¹, *Horche, die Engelchöre singe*², *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*³. On this evening, I recited the poem *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht* written by Franz Gruber. I still remember the poem even though I learned it about 60 years ago. Maria Isaak, a studious, and nice girl, recited the poem *Wanderers Christbaum*⁴. I also kept this poem in my memory. I have written it here.

Earth has been hibernating for a long time
Eyes see frozen, crystal-like snow, wherever they look
A travel-weary and tired wanderer
wanders through the lonely night like a shadow.
He has no place to sleep tonight.

¹ The Feast of all Holy Feasts

² Hark at the Singing Angelic Choirs

³ Silent Night, Holy Night

⁴ The Wanderer's Christmas Tree.

Memories of His Homeland

Father Christmas had not brought him a Christmas tree.

[173]¹

1. The storm howls around the window, the leaves fall from the trees
The autumn wanders through the land. The summer dream has gone.
2. A young teacher sits silently in front of a bright lamp.
Summer has ended for him. Autumn has entered his life.
3. How pale and sad does the noble teacher look!
Heavy, bitter grief is on his face.
4. For he fears for the life of his beloved wife.
Her young body suffers from a severe disease.
5. The door opens, and he sees at the door
the old and revered minister, his fatherly friend.
6. The pastor wrote a Christmas carol imbued by a pure and faithful mind.
Cheerfully, he hands the carol to the young teacher.
7. The pastor then asks the teacher, inspired by noble friendship,
to compose music for his Christmas carol.
8. The teacher looks at the noble pastor.
He cannot promise to find the proper melody.
9. Heavy days and worrisome weeks were to come,
because it appeared that his sick wife will soon die.
10. When the Christ Child came by going from house to house,
the body of his young wife had to be brought out of the house.
11. The teacher stood in his empty house grieving without shedding tears.
He looks at his only child who has lost his mother.
12. Nothing can comfort him, not even gracious music,
the soul's comforter. He takes refuge in melancholy.
13. He cannot write one single song. He tries it in vain.
No song comes out from the deadly wounded heart.

¹ David adds the title "*Silent Night*" (written by Joseph Mohr; melody by Franz Gruber) here, but the poem is not the familiar Christmas carol. It is rather the story of the carol.

[174]

14. The bells are now ringing joyfully. The Holy Night begins.
She forces joy upon the hearts of all humans.
15. Everywhere prevails peace and joy, but the shine of Christmas
cannot reach the lonely man sitting in his lonely chamber.
16. His heart remembers wistfully a wonderful distant time.
Alas, today he feels deep pain more than usual.
17. At the door there appears a shining angel
engulfed by candle light. He approaches the man.
18. The angel is a lovely child. He joyfully leads the man to a room,
where stands a Christmas tree that lovely hands adorned.
19. Then his heart lights up in blessing.
His heart's bitter pains dissolve in hot tears.
20. And heaven's high joy pervades his soul.
The most beautiful harmonies stir his spirit.
21. His eye glows with enthusiasm. He goes to his instrument
to translate into melodies what moves his heart deeply
22. He catches sight of the verses his friend brought to him.
Emotionally moved, he reads "Song of the Silent Night."
23. Shining melodies begin to express the feelings in his heart.
A true Christmas carol is born out of deep sorrow.
24. Next morning, as the people come to church, they hear
the master's carol played by the organ.
25. People listening devoutly. Ardent, every heart
is drawn to heaven by this blissful carol.
26. Until today, heavenly joy pervades every heart
when the master's carol is played and the Christmas tree shines.

[175]

Listen to the ringing bell of the church nearby!
Look at the shining candles behind the windows!
The wanderer falls asleep peacefully at the wayside.
An angel wearing white clothes approaches him.
He points to the stars in the sky and says:

Look! Here your Christmas tree shines.
Give me your hand! Come with me to the eternal star
You, too, should celebrate the birth of the Lord.

Maria Isaak recited the poem very well, as she did everything. The villagers praised her performance. Some people quietly mumbled, “The child could recite the poem all over again.” However, that would not happen. This was not the first time the 10 or 12-year-old girl had brought joy to the parents, teacher, and her fellow students by her powerful recitation despite her shy, modest character. Yet, this time was her last performance. Maria got sick some days after Christmas. On New Year’s Eve, she could not participate when most parts of the Christmas presentation were, by tradition, performed again. Teacher, Neufeld, having noticed that some parents were disappointed as he declared the program was ended, explained why Maria Isaak had not recited her poem. He announced that The Wanderer’s Christmas Tree could not be recited, because Maria Isaak was ill. On hearing this, people said, “What a pity! Is she seriously sick?” No one was able to answer this question. Meanwhile, Maria’s sickness worsened to the degree that her siblings were not allowed to go to school since the doctor diagnosed her with typhus. If someone had typhus, not even the neighbours would visit the sick person’s house so as not to be infected. What else could have been done? Quarantine was necessary. The school especially had to be protected against epidemics. People did not know how Maria was doing until they were informed of her death. Everyone was shocked. Some people commented on Maria’s death, “She passed away like the wanderer in the poem she recited.” The entire school and many people attended as Maria’s coffin was brought to the graveyard, and laid to rest. Her life was really too short. Maria’s body was buried in the frozen soil. Come spring, we children played our children’s games on the empty part of the graveyard that was a green meadow. Often on these occasions, Maria’s girl friends turned to Maria’s grave to visit her, to show their friend that she was missed, and remembered her. Sometime after the death of this very popular student, when talking about Maria Isaak, both girls and boys would say, “I learned The Wanderer’s Christmas Tree by heart so I wouldn’t forget Maria. I often recite it in memory of our modest fellow student who was always so full of joy.” I also think some people thought about Gerhard Neufeld when reciting the poem.

[176] I will add another example to illustrate that Gerhard Neufeld did not only take students in general into account, but considered each student individually. He was able to take a student’s personality into account even when introducing them to science. He was able to sustain the student’s interest, and encourage them. Gerhard Neufeld supported them when they wrestled with various difficulties common to every student by times. Katharina Berg who was particularly small was in our class. She was considered a newcomer because she was not born in the village. In her case, the adage that damaged children will certainly be ridiculed turned out to be true. Isbrand Friesen invented a derisive nickname the very first time he saw her. As a result, the unfortunate girl remained shy and reserved. Whenever she heard the word small, she would wince because she always thought that the word referred to her. She was the only one we used to call “Small.” Small Katharina was well-behaved, and a good student. She was one class below me, and she was a relative of mine. Unfortunately, it was difficult to help her. You couldn’t predict the nickname Isbrand would invent for anyone who protected Small. So, she struggled with difficulties. There would have certainly been many ways to help the little unlucky “Worm.” We had come up

with a good idea to help her without making the situation worse. But Gerhard Neufeld put an end to the whole problem in a laudable manner, to the surprise of both the class and parents.

We did not know whether Gerhard Neufeld wrote the poem himself, or took it from a book. In any case, he brought it up at the right time and place. He made the girl recite a poem titled “Small” at the Christmas Eve presentation to draw attention to her situation. At first, we thought that the teacher was ridiculing her too. But, that wasn’t true. When Katharina went on stage and the teacher announced that she would recite the poem “Small,” people were irritated, but soon became cheerful as Katharina began:

I was always very sad that I was only called the “small.”
I cried a lot because the Lord had made me so small.
Once I decided to think about it more deeply,
I came to the conclusion that my size wasn’t actually too bad.
There are many things on earth tall people struggle with.
They need to bend over, while we can stand up.
The tall also fear the storm more than the small.
The lightning strike is more likely to strike the tower than the shack.
I also want to ask, “Whom did the Savior invite to come to him?”
He asked the small; he didn’t talk about the tall.

The entire audience in the packed hall enthusiastically applauded. Their pity for this small girl turned into joy, and empathy. When the school holidays were over, this small girl wasn’t bullied any more.

Gerhard Neufeld had been able to hit at least three birds with one stone. First, he gave the small girl courage. Secondly, he showed Isbrand that his ridicule of this poor small creature had turned against him. Besides this, he demonstrated that body differences should not be considered bad. [177] By contrast, they can be transformed into joy. Being small isn’t a deficiency.

At the last Christmas festivities organized by Gerhard Neufeld something else made a deep impression on the entire community of Nordheim village since this event anticipated the future. In the school year 1922-23, the first school with seven grades opened in this region of the Mennonite colony. Students from this region attended there to continue higher grades. I was supposed to go there, too, but there was an obstacle. Franz Fröse was both founder and head of this school. He was one of the first men of our settlement who had received a university education. His father was a former elder of the Mennonite Brethren. So he had been raised and educated in a very religious family. But his opinions had changed during his studies. From this school year onwards, the government took control of the entire school system. Classes had to follow the curriculum of the Soviet Ministry of Education. It did not include any religious education. It also brought other changes that our people were not used to in schools. Many parents did not accept the new teaching pedagogy, and they opposed parts of the new curriculum. Parents took out this catastrophe on Franz Fröse because he served as the school’s principal. Many parents said, “Franz Fröse is an atheist. He wants to make our children atheists.” Therefore, they refused to send their children to

school. My parents were also convinced. As a result, I did not attend school with seven grades, but stayed at the village school with Gerhard Neufeld, where I was able to continue my education. This is enough background to understand the events of Christmas Eve.

At the end of the well-prepared Christmas Eve, Franz Fröse and some other teachers from Ebental suddenly made an appearance. They had also organized a Christmas Eve presentation, but without considering the traditions or the parents' will. As the group of teachers from Ebental entered, parents sitting on the benches started to whisper, "He is now coming to destroy the evening." Everyone became quiet. We students, and our teacher felt intimidated. You could read skepticism and embarrassment on the faces of people in the room. Without doubt, the uninvited guests were not comfortable either. However, it seems that Franz Fröse did not care about that. He came to the stage, and wished the students and their parents a happy Christmas. He asked them if he would be allowed to give a short speech. No one dared decline his request, but no one expressed excitement to listen to him. The majority just kept quiet.

Franz Fröse cleared his throat, stood like an orator, and began, "I want to talk about "Peace on Earth" tonight." [178] Everyone was surprised by his announcement. Fröse was in his element. He was an extraordinary orator (like as his father and brothers). His speech wasn't overtly religious, but no one in the audience could have said that it was irreligious even though they would have liked to. After he was done with his speech, he politely thanked the audience for their attention, (indeed, everyone had listened carefully to his speech), and then said goodbye. Unfortunately, no one said thank you to him since the audience was too reserved. Nevertheless, as everyone stood up, I think they were positively surprised by the speech. People had held an inaccurate opinion about teacher Fröse, and had mistrusted him without reason. At home, my father also showed that he was touched. The audience left the hall contented. Back then no one knew that this would be the last Christmas Eve celebrated according to Mennonite customs in Nordheim. Everyone went home to continue to cheerfully celebrate Christmas with their immediate family in the traditional way. Fröse had increased his reputation in the community considerably. People had now seen that they had been influenced by their own prejudice.

Let us now return to Gerhard Neufeld. Even after it had become more difficult to have religious education at school, and eventually been forbidden, Gerhard Neufeld continued to teach religion at my home. However, religious minded teachers increasingly endured intimidation, and sometimes became isolated, not allowed to teach anymore. In this year, Gerhard Neufeld organized a singing class that the entire village youth attended. Most were his former students. He taught us how to use cipher notation¹ and how to apply it when learning new songs. In this way, he helped to enhance the quality of the youth's singing. Until the last year of our pilgrimage in Russia, whenever I met and talked with one of my peers, we would always remember, and be grateful for all the good things that Gerhard Neufeld had done for us.

¹ Cipher notation (*Ziffernsystem*) uses numbers instead of notes to represent pitch. It was commonly used among the Mennonites in Russia.

Gerhard Neufeld increasingly felt that he was not able to do his work according to his principles since he had to adopt the new pedagogic approach. In 1923, he immigrated to Canada after having given up the hope of being free of this constraint. There he taught without the need to compromise his values until he reached the age of retirement, and died. When I travelled to Canada to visit my relatives in 1980, I met Gerhard Neufeld's daughter, Cornelia, with whom I had played as a child in Nordheim. She told me about the last years of her father's life. Gerhard Neufeld is not only remembered as teaching school, but also for teaching us how to live. His entire existence was devoted to teaching. Retrospectively, everyone who got to know him, and experienced him as a teacher praises his achievements. "You deserve to rest in peace."

How the Russian Revolution Affected the German-Russians

[178]¹ Did it cause good or bad things? Gains or losses? That depends on one's point of view. Those who wanted to stay in Russia under any circumstances got their wish. After the revolution, no one talked about German emigration from Russia anymore. By contrast, an autonomous German republic was founded nearby the Volga, where a German settlement with many villages was located. The German regained their own schools. Obviously, religious education was forbidden. Apart from this, the government did not restrict religious freedom. No church was closed, and classes for young people who wanted to join a church community were not prevented. Besides this, the village-based agricultural system was not fundamentally changed.

In the beginning, the Soviet government solely targeted the property of industrial and agrarian businesses. The Soviets expropriated property from the bourgeoisie and large landholders. The state got control of the industrial sector, while the land was divided among the landless farmers and the newly-founded state-owned farms (Sovkhoz). The economy was not reformed on a national basis, but on state principles. However, the new government's measures only affected a small part of the German population. Some large landholders who fell prey to expropriation were able to emigrate, but others were executed.² Initially, the transformation to a state-economy was done on a small scale. At the beginning of the economic transformation of the countryside, the vast majority of German Russians were not threatened by the reform since they were peasants, even though a large number of them could be considered well-off, even rich. The governing Communist Party had no plans to target farmers at this point. Consequently, the bulk of farmers were

¹ This page number is duplicated.

² Mennonite agricultural estates were amassed in the 1860s when land was inexpensive and large tracts were needed for pasturing sheep. These gradually transitioned to arable farming and land values rose from a few rubles to 400-500 rubles a *desiatina* by 1914. Many were recognized as models for agricultural production. Estates varied from 500 to 100,000 *desiatinas*. Estate Owners (*Gutsbesitzer*) formed a distinct and privileged social group even among fellow Mennonites.

initially content with the outcome of the revolution. Obviously, they were not happy about what happened in the country, but they were relieved because the Russian Revolution prevented the deportation of German Russians to Siberia, or their emigration from Russia. They were glad that the danger of being expelled from their land had been averted. The Germans, especially the Mennonites, had not cared about politics, and so were shortsighted. They only cared about what happened at home or in their own surroundings, and they were now eager to restore order, and to begin to prosper again according to the old traditions and customs. A few were more farsighted. They were cautious, and said to themselves, "The revolution might continue. This is only the beginning. I do not trust peace. I will leave." Thinking in this way, they left for Canada. At that time, Canada still welcomed Germans. Sickness was not a reason to be denied entry. The few cautious Russian Germans later turned out to be the lucky ones. They enjoyed a good life. After the peace of 1918, it would take a long time until it became truly peaceful. The war against the foreign powers evolved into a civil war. That's when war really started.

[179] The royalist generals, (e. g. Denikin, Wrangel, Krasnov, Shkuro, Yudenich) did not want to yield to the Red Army¹ organized by Trotsky (Bernstein) without a fight. This resulted in an intense civil war without a break from the European war. When you had to deal with soldiers, you would never know which army it was. On the same day, you could encounter soldiers from different troops that were fighting against each other. It was also difficult to figure out which side you should support. Immediately on their arrival, the army that took control of an area demanded supplies for its soldiers, fodder for horses, or even demanded horses and wagons. They frequently requested both wagons and carters at the same time. And so it happened that one army could mobilize the father with his wagon, while the other mobilized the son with another wagon. The armies would take some of the carters into their service for several days, if not weeks. Who knew how far from home they might be taken? At some point, the carters would give up the horses and wagons, and head home on foot, or some other way, carrying only their horsewhips. During these times, one army took my brother Gerhard, and our second wagon. However, he did return home with the wagon. At that time, some young people of our villages gathered to form self-defense units, and joined the imperial army or the so-called White Army. So, in order to defend their farms with guns, some Mennonites gave up their non-resistance to which previously they had strictly adhered. This faithlessness of some young Mennonites later proved to be catastrophic for the entire Russian-Mennonite population. I remember exactly how a group of riders approached our farm one day, dismounted from their horses, and greeted my father. They entered the house, and were provided with lunch. My father sat with these young men at the table but we children were not allowed. He spoke with them in rough German. After they had left our farm, my father was very nervous and agitated. We found out that these soldiers belonged to the White Army. They were young Mennonite men from our own colony. Our relative, Kornelius Pauls from Nikolayevka, where my brother Hans had attended the Central School, was among these young Mennonites.

These events took place at the beginning of the civil war. My brother Hans had still not returned home from the world war. Later, we learned that my father had behaved

¹ At that time, the Imperial army was called the White Army, while the revolutionaries were called the Red Army.

aggressively towards the young Mennonites. Three dead bodies of these “heroes” were later found. They had been shot by the Red Army. Kornelius Pauls had to conceal himself from the Red Army at our house after the Red Army’s victory. He had barely escaped death. He took charge of the farms of our neighbour Justina Toews whose husband had died from typhus. (Afterward, he married Sara Klassen, who lived across the street. A little later, he succeeded in immigrating to Canada, where he now spends his last days as an elderly man.) The civil war continued.

Apart from the Red and White army, there were also anarchist groups because there was no stable government. Local Russians had formed these groups that mainly consisted of former landless workers (*batraken*) who had been employed by prosperous farmers before and after the war. While doing their work, they had not always been treated humanely. [180] In their anger they took this opportunity for revenge on anyone who had once treated them strictly—regardless of whether they had deserved it or not—or even mistreated them. These people had convinced themselves that their time had come. Weapons could be found everywhere, so they armed themselves with guns, pistols, hand grenades, and even machine guns. They ransacked villages at any time, especially at night. They went from house to house and taking everything that they were able to carry away: food, clothing, shoes, bedclothes, musical instruments, wall clocks, kitchen appliances, jewelry, sifters, and toys. They took everything they saw, and everything they could easily grab. Riding in groups, they were often accompanied by a *droshky*¹ that they could have found easily, especially in German areas. They took away horses from the barns, saddled them, and harnessed them to the carriages. Then they loaded their spoils, and hurried away. The brigands were very mobile because of their light carriages, and they knew well how to plunder the houses they entered. Their victims had to open all cupboards, dressers, boxes, cellars, and chambers swiftly upon the robbers’ orders. In the case that they reacted too slowly, the anarchists began to force the locks. Any one of the household who dared to resist was beaten. The robbers were always in a hurry because they were being chased by government troops. They became increasingly crueler since they could find less that they were interested in pillaging. The more brutal among them destroyed what they could not carry, or did not want to take. Women and young girls were exposed to special dangers. The robbers were likely to seize, and sexually abuse young females who were poorly hidden, or had not hidden. Indeed, rapes were frequent.

Our farmer population acted submissively, and refrained from provoking these anarchists being afraid of mistreatment. This is why the brigands did not murder many of our farmers. In the neighbouring village, they had killed five to six farmers most brutally. A man of the house shot one of the robbers. During the nightly raid, they faced each other with loaded guns. The house owner was quicker than the robber and fired first. That was it. Individual robbers or two of them were oftentimes creeping around the fields on horseback. When they attacked the villages, they usually said, “Give us your money! Give as much as you have!” In most cases, these robbers were drunk, being particularly dangerous since they acted irrationally.

¹ A low four-wheeled open carriage.

Memories of His Homeland

We all remember well one of the many incidents because my father barely escaped death on this occasion. One of the lone robbers went to our village, and came to our farmstead. My father stood in front of the door. The riding intruder shouted from afar, "Give me your money, or else I will fire." My mother, and four or five of us children, ran to the door as we heard the screaming. The criminal was standing there pointing the pistol at my father while shouting in his rage. My father handed over his wallet. (Later, he told us that he only had three rubles in the wallet.) He said, "I do not have more." The robber got angrier and angrier, and forced my father to stand in front of the wall. As he pointed his gun directly at my father, we all ran out of the house. [181] My father grasped his head with both hands. When the gun fired, we began to scream. The rider swore, but turned his horse around quickly, and hurried away. Father stood shocked in front of the wall, and we ran up to him. My father hugged us all and said, "Come close to me, my beloved family." As he went into the hall of our house, he knelt down, and praised his Lord because He had turned away the bullet from his head. We all sobbed.

During this time, my brother Hans returned home from his military service. He suffered from typhus. My sister Tina also became infected.

While a storm brought a lot of snow, a refugee family sought shelter at our home. This elderly couple was using two handcars for transport with three sons and two daughters. The daughters were already adults, whereas the boys were younger. The youngest was younger than me. It was a respectable family, and used to be well-off, but they had lost their home, and were now able to pack their remaining belongings into the two handcars. Without knowing where to go, they had gone off into the wilderness. The family was trying to save their lives. We did not know them at all. Who could they have turned to at the start of winter? So, they all stayed at our house. We enjoyed a peaceful time for a while. But the situation changed dramatically when a group of anarchists invaded our home, and found out who our guests were. The family was now in serious danger. The robbers ransacked our house for several days. They went through everything taking things away. They stole horses, carriages, clothes, and anything else. The family stood still in their poor clothing. The girls also lost their virginity.

As the sun increasingly warmed the soil at the beginning of spring, these people gradually disappeared. At that time, Elvira and I went to school. Elvira was in the first grade, while I attended the fourth grade. Whenever we returned home, the robbers were either there, or had left. We all lived in anxiety and despair to some extent, not only our unfortunate guests but also us. The difference between the families was that we had already lost our belongings, while the other family was now also deprived of their property. The only things that remained were our courage, and hope that the tyrants would leave us alone.

The situation changed, indeed, but it was unclear whether it was getting better, easing the economy. The civil war had lasted two years. The main forces of the counter-revolutionary troops were slowed down, but the revolutionary Red Army had not won yet. Most anarchist groups had been beaten down, so it had become more peaceful. Nightly raids ceased, but it was still dangerous to be outside at night. To leave the house at night meant the possibility of attack and death. During the two years of the civil war even the Russian population had been impoverished. However, there were still horses, cows and

most agricultural machinery that could be produced. In short, farmers had hope for the future. Until now, the state drew on its own resources to provide the army with supplies; but the state was running out of supplies. It was not possible to demobilize the troops since the Red Army had not yet defeated all the enemies of the revolution. The Red Army needed bread, meat, horses, fodder for horses, and many other things to continue the war with the same vigour. The government controlled the industries, but they also needed supplies from farms. How could they get what they wanted?

[182] Considering the lack of supplies, the Soviet government headed by Vladimir Lenin (Ulyanov) saw themselves forced to introduce the agenda of “Military Communism” in Russia. The Communist government decreed that every authority was permitted to nationalize anything that was useful to support the conflict against counter-revolutionary forces. The government deemed it necessary to take such radical measures since a large part of the farm population refused to provide the government with their last crops, cattle (meaning meat), and the other resources necessary for cultivating the land. The new governmental orders implied that agriculture would ultimately decline. In fact, the way the government deprived the farmers of their belongings (wealth) only deviated from how the anarchist group ransacked the farms during the civil war insofar as the anarchists took everything and ran away, while the farmers now had to bring to delivery points whatever the authorities demanded of them. This way it seemed that the farmers were doing it voluntarily. The decree also stated that the authorities were allowed to forcefully nationalize whatever they wanted if someone disobeyed the order.

The principle of expropriation spread from top to bottom. The farmers were at the bottom. An order was imposed on a district. The district then distributed it over the sub-districts. The sub-districts then gave each village their quota. The village administrator then asked the farmers to supply the demanded goods. They brought every kind of food to the village administrator (in Nordheim, to our house): eggs, butter, baked bread, meat, oats, barley, hay, cattle, horses, carriages, and so forth. The higher level of administration received the supplies and delivered them to higher authorities. We needed to take care of the transportation of the requested goods. There was an order on how to do this: one day, it was the job of one farmer; on the next day, it was his neighbour's duty; and so forth.

It is hard to imagine how much was brought to our farm, and shipped on. We not only collected a lot of supplies and livestock on our farm but also witnessed long scolding tirades, or floods of tears. In addition, the farm got very dirty, so we children had to clean it up, doing this together most of the time.

There was one duty that was mine alone. I had to inform the neighbours about what supplies they needed to provide. Again and again, I rode through the village on my white horse. I had a list from my father, and later from my brother Hans. At that time, I attended the third and fourth grades, and was 10 and 11 years old. Only a small garden lay between the school and my home. I was often called out of school. When I reached the door to the barn, my father was already coming towards me with the white horse. Had the horse been saddled? Of course not. My backside had to get used to the stiff back of my loyal white horse because it was so skinny. I can hardly describe how much my horse and I disliked these regular “home visits.” The reason for this is that my visit did not end after I had

informed the male or female owners of the house about the supplies they had to provide. Upon receiving my “happy message,” I often had to accept the householder’s “reward” for my service. They did not always treat me politely because the farmers got more and more nervous and distressed about my news. [183] The reactions of the “uncles” (as the children used to call the adult men of the village) often puzzled me, or I felt that I was not fairly received since I was not to blame for this miserable situation. When I complained to my father about the attitude of some farmers towards me, my father calmed me down by saying things such as, “You need to understand that it is difficult for our citizens to get used to how our situation has worsened. They do not mean any harm. They know it’s not your fault.”

But one day I felt that an uncle, considered stingy, scolded me too much. I started to cry, and was unable to compose myself. When I went to the next uncle, Rogalsky, I was crying. It was always a happy occasion when I met this man, who was not a young man. He was a large landowner, but he had a simple and good character. He was very appealing since he owned a blacksmith’s shop where he enjoyed working. I occasionally visited him there, and was allowed to watch how he worked with red-hot iron skillfully making complicated things. I could ask whatever I liked, and he would always provide me with a sober and detailed answer. He was a good friend of my father. The village had once elected him as administrator, but he had acted too generously. Whenever I brought one of my bad tidings to him, he interrupted me, and only asked, “What do I need to deliver? How much? And when?” However, he now looked at me and uttered, “You are crying. Does sitting on the back of your horse hurt you? Wait for a moment! I will bring you a sack on which you can sit.” After he had brought the sack to me, I told him what had just happened to me before visiting him. He listened to me attentively, and then calmed me just as my father would have. He put the sack in the right place and said to me, “Don’t cry! At least he didn’t beat you!” I thanked him and continued my ride. While I was riding, I thought about how different these two neighbours were. (I will write more about my reflections later.) Just one more detail about this story. In the evening on the same day, my father held a village meeting to discuss several issues. At the end of the gathering, uncle Rogalsky began to speak about my incident. He asked the neighbours to be nice to me, and revealed the name of the man who had insulted me. My father was shocked about what he heard since I had not reported the incident to him. During the meeting, he did not add anything to Rogalsky’s speech. He just thanked him.

When the war between the Red Army, and the remaining troops of the Imperial generals increasingly moved from central Russia to the periphery accompanied by the rumble of gunfire, and the rattling machine guns, the economy completely slowed down. It was unclear how it could ever recover. Nevertheless, I was able to gain something good from these times. I got to know all our neighbours in a profound way. Indeed, no one knew them better than me. However, I was pretty young. I don’t pretend that I understood adequately everything I had encountered. Nonetheless, the experiences of human behaviour taught me that all that glitters is not gold. Some people who always went to church, wearing black tailcoats, acted very differently on the six weekdays. I was often astonished by the discrepancy. [184] With the collapse of country’s entire economy, and continued decline, trade had come to a halt—nothing was left to trade. Some Jews who had some manufactured goods came by once in a while. However, even if he had a carriage loaded

with the most necessary supplies, he would not have sold much because people lacked the money to purchase anything. I had neither pants nor shirt for Sunday and my elder siblings barely had any clothing. Nevertheless, our family provided my brother Gerhard with the means to continue to attend university despite challenging circumstances. In light of the fact that he had a walking disability, my parents and siblings did everything that we could to support him in acquiring higher education.

We had worn out our agricultural equipment from use. There was no possibility of buying new. Nonetheless, we cultivated a part of our farmland in spring 1920. Two or three neighbours harnessed a plow and a seeder. When farmers begin to sow, they find hope again. The conflicts became much more local. Surviving enemies of the revolution exerted much effort and risked all in order to emigrate, and escape. Other people capitulated, and tried to adapt to the new political system (or more precisely, the chaos). All surviving people capable of work endeavoured to repair the damages, and produce new things. But the more people hoped, the more they were disappointed when their expectations proved to be false. It seemed that the clouds were deprived of water, and that nature wanted to take revenge on humans because of the brutal violence, and absurdity of those years, especially the shedding of blood, both the guilty and the innocent. Your impression was that the soil was infected, and ceased to contain life. Indeed, nature took revenge because of all the unnatural misdeeds that angry and pitiless men had committed against nature. From 1920 to 1922, this powerful country experienced bad harvests. The natural and inevitable result of the two failed harvests was famine. It was the peak of the catastrophe caused by war, revolution, civil war, communism, and bad harvests. Famine and epidemics. Thousands of people died of hunger. Death reigned in the city, the countryside, in the homes, the fields and the streets. No one could ever forget this time; it was too impressive. The time was so terrible that you could never grieve all the victims who fell prey to this mass annihilation when recalling the past. The tragedy was too pitiful to carelessly forget. It was also impossible to come up with anything that could have prevented the catastrophe, or mitigated the sorrow and misery. Russia did obtain some help. In particular, the Russian-Germans received much support from the American Relief Administration (A. R. A).

How much livestock did the farmers still possess? At first, most cattle and sheep were slaughtered for meat, and later the same happened to some horses. Also, many dogs were eaten. You could see beggars on every street. The low point was reached after the New Year's Day in 1921 and 1922. [185] Initially, beggars received a piece of bread, then a small piece of bread with a boiled turnip; later only a boiled turnip. And last, in spring, there was nothing left to share with them. Every day groups of two, four or six men dug graves to bury the dead in fields or along roads. From the beginning of January until the end of March, the famine worsened. At that time, the surviving lost their empathy because of their own increasing helplessness. Apart from this, you could also observe how people changed their attitude towards dying humans and dead bodies. The uncanny and unpleasant feeling that the sight and smell of bodies evoked under normal circumstances gradually disappeared. Instead, people got used to the dead and were indifferent to them. Those forced to consider dying and the dead tended to embrace the mindset that life is vain and idle. They thought that what they did to the bodies of the dead one day could happen to their own bodies on the next. But consider that humans react very differently to such situations.

During my childhood, I experienced and learned a lot of things that books do not teach. Moreover, people who went through it don't explain either.

This is the way the first months of 1922 passed. How many people, both old and young, yearned for the warming sun of spring to revive nature! Indeed, the hopeful sun did appear at the right time. As the sun made the snow covering the earth disappear, its warming rays penetrated the upper layers of the soil, touching the seeds laying in them, the long-awaited plants began to grow. Then you saw many hungry people walking along the fringes of the farmland and farm tracks. They were eager to spot any snowdrop, tiny grape, or other greenery that strove towards the sun. We experienced a wonderful spring that year. Beforehand, there had been severe winter with lots of snow, so that the soil was completely soaked by the melt. It seemed that the earth and the sun were trying to compensate the humans a little for the poor harvest of the past two years. In those years, the soil caused famine by not providing for humans. Now nature conveyed the impression that she aspired to make up for those bad harvests, and provide more than usual. Everything with roots began to grow, sprawl, and thrive. That rescued us. During spring we learned something we would not have learned otherwise: people can survive without starving by eating only grass and herbs. People who always seemed sick regained their health and were even healthier than before the famine after eating mainly, or exclusively, herbs and grass all spring. This happened even though they were not satiated by this diet. Medical doctors explained this phenomenon by arguing that some people had eaten too much heavy food, using the whole digestive system, overloading and overburdening it. The digestion had had a chance to "rest." Some human organs that were not really healthy before the famine, and that doctors did not know how to treat, recovered thanks to the pharmacy of nature, not based on human knowledge and skill. [186] This argument makes sense, considering the sorts of herbs that hungry people had eaten. They had devoured several types of flowers, grasses, spinach, stinging nettle, wild radish, peppermint, and other edible herbs.

That spring, my father, and we children, saw something that was particularly relevant for my father. Mulberry hedges separated our farmsteads and gardens from each other in our village as was traditional in Mennonite communities. The hedge on the left side of the yard cast a shadow.¹ We did not weed the shaded strip since we could not plant anything there. We had given up two or three metres of our land and then planted a raspberry hedge where the sun's rays began to hit the ground. This raspberry hedge stood parallel to the mulberry hedge. The strip between the two hedges was uncultivated. Since we usually walked along that strip, wild herbs could not grow there. We sometimes pulled out weeds that had grown too high, or mowed them with a scythe. During this spring, we learned that two women from the village were seen walking through the back of our garden gathering something from this strip, not coming from the road out front. Both women had many children and barely anything to eat. We thought that it was good they were able to find something there. However, we did not believe that there was really anything to pick since the entire garden was black soil. Our situation was still relatively good, even though we barely had any millet, barley, or grain to make into flour or porridge.

¹ Nordheim's main street ran in a north-south direction. The Toews farmstead was number 9 on the western side of the road, so this hedge was running east-west.

One day, my father wanted to know what these women were gathering. He went along the row of raspberries and looked at the other side. What did he find there? He was astonished. The entire strip that was fifty metres long and three metres wide was green. The land was relatively densely covered with about one hundred twenty to one hundred fifty square metres of wild spinach. He now stood in front of the women and witnessed how they were plucking the spinach leaves, and putting them into their bags. One of them was Mrs. Warkentin, who tried to save her family from starvation by gathering these sour plants. (Her family consisted of one man and five or six boys. One was better looking than the others. The parents were good-looking, too.) It was known that this family struggled to get enough food. Upon catching sight of my father, the woman was terrified. My father said, "Good Morning!" The woman replied to him anxiously, "Will you rebuke me because I picked the spinach without asking first?" My father calmed her down and asked her who the woman was with whom she sometimes picked. It was also a woman who had to save her family from starvation. Mrs. Warkentin then composed herself and asked, "Am I allowed to pick spinach here? We did not have anything else to eat." [187] My father answered: "Dear Madam, I did not sow this spinach. In fact, no human planted something here. Therefore, I cannot claim exclusive ownership of the spinach. It was sown by a farmer who owns everything on earth, including the soil, and what grows on it. Legally, I am the owner of this strip of land, but I technically lost the right to claim it because nothing I planted here would grow. Now someone has shown us how many benefits this strip brings. We can harvest things that we lack right now. Everyone is invited to pick as much spinach from this land as they want whenever they wish. Be careful with the spinach! Do not trample it with your feet! Tell other people about the spinach! It can feed many people!" My father said goodbye to the women and returned home.

After we sat down for dinner, he asked us whether we had already seen what had happened behind the rows of raspberries. Of course, no one of us had known about it or had been there. He told us about what he had experienced today, and found something on his land that he had not known about. He often had to think about where this spinach had come from especially since the spinach appeared that spring as such a blessing to starving people. Could you grasp what had happened? We discussed this event several times, but we never understood it completely. My father once said, "We might find an explanation for this one day." After having said this, he opened his Bible and read, "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. (Matthew 21:42) We had decided to abandon this strip of land, and now we see how many blessings are received from it. It turned out to be the most useful strip of land we owned. I don't think that there is a purely empirical explanation for this wonder. If we seek the true solution to this riddle, we will then find it, but we won't comprehend this mysterious event if we don't look to the Lord!"

The next day, each family member went to the strip between the hedges to see how much the spinach was growing. My brother Gerhard took a look at the strip, too. At that time, he was a student of the Central school, and he had learned something about drawing reasonable conclusions. He was particularly interested in biology, and he thought that he knew some reasons why the spinach had grown. My father thus said, "Go on. Tell us." We attentively listened to our older and "scholarly" brother. Gerhard argued that the main reason for the strong vegetation was that a mulberry hedge had been cut down in the autumn

so that the sun's rays were now able to reach this strip of land. The high hedge had previously hidden this strip from the sun. Now the sun shone on the strip, and the raspberry hedge protected it from the north wind. In addition to this, the sun was shining very warmly this spring. As a result of all these factors, the soil of the strip warmed up early. The soil was fresh enough for the spinach, and not saturated with water. If there hadn't been spinach seeds there, another weed would have grown. Moreover, there were high wild spinach plants with many seeds at the back of our garden. They stood in the middle of other types of weeds until the seeds got ripe. Usually, we were busy in the front part of the yard. There we could eat mulberries, pluck raspberries and do other things. The previous autumn, we had gathered everything that could serve as food for the cattle during winter because of the food shortage. So, we also turned to this strip of weedy land where we could find a lot, [187¹] In the shade of the hedge, weeds had grown better than usual due to the drought. More precisely, they were able to survive better. In autumn, we had cut down the hedge because we needed it for fuel for heating. Besides this, we also used the wood of the mulberry trunks. We had to use everything. We pulled the weeds from the back of the garden and brought them to the barn to store them thereby crossing this strip of land. In so doing, the wild spinach seeds dropped in this front part of the garden. When we raked, the seeds spread. At the end of autumn, we also raked leaves together to bring them to the barn. There were many of them on the strip along the hedges. By pulling out the weeds and raking, we softened the ground a bit to sow the spinach seeds shallowly in the soil. The spinach seeds sprouted more quickly than usual because of the warm temperature in spring. The spinach had covered the soil with its large leaves, preventing the other weed seeds from sprouting. My brother Gerhard added, "I believe that the weeds will flourish this year after the spinach has been harvested. However, if the mulberry hedge grows higher, the shade will again hamper the growth of the spinach and the weeds just as it did before. Nevertheless, the spinach might continue to grow alongside the hedge for a long time because it also grows in shade, but the growth will probably decrease. Moreover, it won't spread many seeds this year. I believe that all these factors contributed to the growth of spinach." My brother had finished his explanation. Then father asked him, "Do you not think that our God had some influence on these events?" Gerhard replied to him, "Why not? God makes the plants flourishing. However, I think that if human actions had not caused the developments about which I talked, not much spinach would have grown on this strip of land." My father replied, "Indeed, this adage proves to be true: Do what you can do, God will do what He does. However, He rules everything in the end." No one contradicted father. He closed the debate by praising my brother for logical conclusions. I did not contribute anything to this conversation, but I thought I would like to be as learned as my brother. Unfortunately, this would never happen.

This year, nature gave humanity a warm spring, a promise of a good harvest. The people who survived the famine regained hope for the future. In that same direction, the economic-political conditions changed too. The difficult years of the revolution were over. The committee for landless farmers distributed many properties of landholding farmers to landless ones. The villagers who lost land apart from their 30 hectares had to accept this decision. It helped that they could not cultivate more land anyway because of the shortage of horses and agricultural machines.

¹ The page number 187 was used on two consecutive sheets.

Now, something had to happen! And indeed, what happened was totally unexpected. The Soviet government, under the leadership of V. Lenin, introduced the New Economic Policy to rebuild the totally destroyed agriculture. [188] Farmers had experienced and cursed the consequences of War Communism. They were now curious to know what the New Economic Policy would mean to them. This newly created term “New Economic Policy” irritated farmers. Likewise, people were skeptical about the implications, and real consequences of the reform. We did not worry too much overall because the situation could not become much worse. So, people were not completely upset about these new policies. They only adopted a disdainful attitude.

Now that I was age 14, I was not a child anymore. I looked at many things from a different perspective than two years before. I had the impression that I understood the situation better. I remember a story that a Jewish merchant told us as we invited him to our table. The Jew, whose name was Mokemov, was considered a reliable merchant in our area. He knew most local farmers personally. He used to drive with his carriage loaded with his commodities through our villages to sell his wares, and knew what farmers needed throughout the year. He brought them everything necessary for a farmer’s household: spools of twine, winter clothing, bulk goods, shoes, hats, forks and knives, spoons and plates. You did not have to pay for it immediately, but you could buy it on “credit,” as we used to say. He spoke Low German fluently. That was beneficial because Mennonites often struggled with High German. He was benevolent, honest, and merry, and spread hope when talking to people. He enjoyed making jokes, and telling funny stories. He hadn’t come for some time fearing that he might be robbed. Besides, he knew that the people had lost the means to buy things. But he restarted his business in this spring. First, he only came with a bundle of goods since he had to establish new connections, and to find out what people now needed. He especially maintained a close relationship with my father. Sometime in the past, he had taught Yiddish to my father. He asked him at his visit that took place after a long break, “Are you still able to speak Yiddish? I speak hardly any Low German.¹”

Being knowledgeable about the New Economic Policy, he said that we would now have the same lot as the serfs had. He told a story of a time when a lord had ordered his servant to go through the lord’s holdings to collect taxes. The taxman then replied to him that the farmers didn’t have anything left. They would start to scold him when he would come to fulfill his duty. It would become more and more difficult. The master had then said to him, “Double the tax! And bring everything to me.” The servant left to act upon his master’s order. But when he returned to the master with the sum he had demanded, he said to him, “They all were crying.” The master responded to this, “In that case, return to them and collect the same sum again. Make sure that you perform my request.” The servant left his master resentfully. When he returned to the farmers and asked him for the requested money, they broke out in laughter and did not stop laughing at him even though he gradually spoke more strictly to them. Whatever he did, they continue to laugh. He got angry and returned home. After he had explained to his master that he had been unable to obtain the money because the farmers only laughed at his demand, the master said to him, “Now you can stop collecting taxes. If they start laughing, they won’t have any money left.” [189] The Jew concluded his story with the following remark, “And now we are

¹ This quote is in Low German.

laughing about the New Economic Policy. You will see that times will change.” My father replied to him, “Indeed, times are always changing. The question is whether they change for the better.” The merchant then ended the table talk as follow. “I assure you, if times had not become better, I would not have come.”¹ He bade goodbye in the friendliest manner. “I will come soon again.”²

After we had been sitting silently at the table for a while, my father said, “There must be a good reason why Mokemov holds this opinion. At the end of the day, he is a Jew, and Jewish people are more knowledgeable than we are.” However, the implications of the New Economic Policy soon became clear to us.

1. The state took possession of the land that used to belong to the church, and the former estates. The state distributed the land among those who were willing to cultivate it.
2. All landless farmers would obtain land if they had still had not received any. Moreover, it was legal to establish villages on the lands of former estates.
3. All farmers were allowed to cultivate their land, and to do business as they wished. They were permitted to use their earnings to equip their own farms.
4. The poorest farmers received loans to purchase cattle, and agricultural machinery.
5. All craftsmen were allowed to open workshops, and to produce what they could.
6. The state provided financial resources to working class people who wanted to further their education.
7. The state took responsibility for all educational institutions. The state hired, and paid the teachers.
8. Private small-scale trade was legal as long as it was regulated by the state. However, people were allowed to trade as they wished.

They claimed that all these measures were achievements of the proletarian and socialist revolution.

The Reality of the New Economic Policy

The vast majority of the Russian population was happy that the young Soviet government had changed its political direction. The Soviets saw that the present situation could not continue. They wanted to support the farmers who had recently acquired land in the determination, and now with the means, to get out of poverty. That’s why Russian farmers had supported the revolution. They had fought to acquire land. They had now taken possession of land, and were eager to take revenge on their exploiters. Now they wanted to

¹ This quote is in Low German.

² This quote is in Low German.

start their own businesses at home. Moreover, the bread supplies of the government had been entirely exhausted—the warehouses were empty. The state was unable to feed the workers, so they had to suffer from hunger while doing their work. The state needed coal, and ore to build heavy industry as quickly as possible. In so doing, the Soviet Union would become more independent from western capitalist economies. Having heavy industry would allow the Soviets to equip their army to defend the state. They were threatened by foreign backing of the counter-revolutionaries.

[190] Indeed, there was an immediate need for more food supplies. The Soviets had a shortage of bread, meat, sugar, milk, butter, and eggs. However, they also wanted cotton, canvas, and other items produced by the agricultural sector. They desperately looked for artisans who were able to make tools on their own with the primitive means of only hammers and axes, considering that manufacturers had been destroyed. As already mentioned, there were shortages of everything needed for survival. In particular, no one dared to take the initiatives on an individual or collective level. That was the main reason for the New Economic Policy, and the policies of the new government turned out to be successful. The following verse from a song devoted to nature epitomizes how the Russian population felt about the current state of their country.

This is the last time that the sun looks through the airy clouds,
You are not able to stop it.
And the last ray of old happiness crosses the valley and abyss.
And the forest and heath get bright so that you think you are safe.
This is the way the sunny spring day starts after a long winter full of suffering.

This political change in Russian took place between 1922 and 1923. The year before, we had had a regular harvest. We reaped enough to feed ourselves, and to maintain the young cattle that could survive the winter. The entire lands of the Germans had not been devastated. The people were already talking that something had improved. In particular, we felt relieved since it was more peaceful. We were no longer exposed to armed gangs on the streets. We could sleep peacefully again at night. Gangs stopped their plundering. Likewise, we were able to resume our religious practices on Sunday, and to have gatherings. Normal seemed to resume, and people began to behave more friendly towards each other. People often laughed.

Some Germans, especially Mennonites, were not entirely happy. People who understood the program of the Communist Party were skeptical. Those who made an effort to observe what was happening in schools had the same doubt. Considering that the teacher Neufeld often visited our home, we were aware. He told us about how he felt about his work. (I've already mentioned this). My brother Gerhard, and my brother-in-law Neufeld, sister Maria's husband, also were teachers. In short, everyone who paid close attention to the situation in the country was suspicious. Many of our neighbours weren't optimistic about the future. The Soviets restricted and threatened our religion. Our young people had to successfully appeal to a court for a judge's exemption from military service. Many subjects (geography, history, arithmetic) were now taught in the Russian language at German schools.

Those with understanding thought, “I don’t believe that the Communists have good intentions in the long run despite the impression they give us right now.” They were not beguiled by the Soviets. This group formed a minority among Mennonites then, and they did everything possible to leave Russia. At that time, Canada was not very strict about the health conditions of the immigrants. So, the most skeptical and wise Mennonites immigrated to Canada. At this juncture, my father made one of the biggest mistakes of his life. He often regretted this error with tears in his eyes after it was too late to change things. My father was not interested in Canada. Instead, he wanted to go to Germany. However, Germany was not welcoming immigrants. Unfortunately, he did not consider that he could have immigrated to Germany via Canada.

[191] In the meantime, life moved on. It was an exciting time. Everyone was enthusiastic so things had to get better. Indeed, our life improved very quickly. (See: “My Parents.” I do not want to repeat myself.)

Here, I will report personal experiences that prepared me for the future. I was shocked that I could not continue my education at the newly founded secondary school. After recovering from this, I was still disappointed for a long time. But I survived this crisis since my character did not allow me to passively give up hope. I avoided unhealthy despair because my parents and older siblings had educated me in optimism. At that time, I read the works of Körner¹, and found a quote in his drama *The Cousin from Bremen*² that supported my optimism, “We humans should not surrender. The doors to happiness are open as long as we have a little bit of energy left. In this case, not all your joys have faded away. So, be hopeful!”

I had luck, and found a replacement for my loss. From my early childhood onwards, I developed a passion for craftsmanship, woodworking, metalworking and mechanics. As a result of the agricultural reforms, I could advance my skills by working on many different things. Reaper-binders, and other agricultural machines needed repairing—everything was broken or entirely outdated. Therefore, there were many opportunities available for practicing craftsmanship, woodworking and metalworking. After a short time, I was engaged with my surroundings in a mutually beneficial relationship. People knew that it was not my fault that I did not attend secondary school, and that I was continuing my education on my own because I rarely joined the company of my peers. For a while, I needed to adjust myself to the fact that my dreams had not worked out, and I preferred to be alone. Then I found books that helped me regain my strength. After a short period, I also found work so I didn’t have time to be aimless. I sometimes even worked on Sunday, of which my family did not approve, but my father knew why. He also felt that he was a little bit to blame for my current situation. My sister once told me that she had heard father had said to mother, “I believe that we did wrong by David.”

From this time on, I pretended that I was happy and merry, and I stopped working on Sunday. I read and wrote more. I was actively involved in the organization of literary evenings under the guidance of our local teacher. I continued singing in the choir, and did

¹ Theodor Körner 1791-1813

² *Der Vetter aus Bremen*

many other things. People soon asked me to do repair jobs: sewing machines, bicycles, centrifuges, hunting rifles, clocks, jewelry, metal work, locks, and so forth. This work was very meaningful to me, and helped to build my practical skills. It helped me to acquire theory that increase the efficiency of my work. In addition, it prevented me from becoming lazy. I was motivated to fulfill my obligations as quickly as possible since people needed their machines. My work also taught me how to be organized. I began to appreciate my own, and my customers' time. Being a craftsman, I first enjoyed helping other people, and later I became aware of producing things necessary for myself. I gradually was more pleased with my work. That was one of the main reasons why I didn't do my job out of material interest. Nevertheless, it was necessary to consider the real benefits of work too. Apart from that, I became convinced as a youth that work results don't make us really happy, but our love for the work does satisfy us (it does not matter what we are actually doing). In this way, we do not consider working a burden, but a joy, and surely escape laziness. This is an important adage, "Idleness is the beginning of all vice." The sage was right who said we need to shift between leisure and work. Until today, I am convinced of a proverb I often heard my hard working, beloved mother say, "Work makes us life enjoyable, so it never burdens us. Only those who hate to work have troubles." Mother also added that work is a person's best friend.

The practical labour contributed to my applied, or creative (to use the term I prefer) education, especially during my early youth. In the meantime, singing, reciting poems and performances served my moral/spiritual education. As I have said, we did these things at home from the very earliest childhood. Parents emphasized these activities because they saw them as means for ethical and spiritual education. We often heard them saying, "You can trust people who sing. Evil people do not know how to sing." After finishing school, I joined our village choir, and was a member of it as long as the choir existed. (In 1929, German choirs ceased to exist in our area.) In 1927, I was the replacement for the lead singer who had immigrated to Canada. I was in charge of the choir until it was dissolved in the wake of the large emigration movement in 1929.

My brother Gerhard did much for the singing at home. Every year during the summer break, he returned home from teaching in the Caucasus. He taught us beautiful new songs each year. Every evening, after we were through working, we would sing together outside our home, or in the hall with the windows and door open. Then a crowd of people would gather at the street to listen to the singing of our "family choir." This is how we made music. We all knew how to play guitar, mandolin, and we learned how to use the reed organ in the last two years (1927-1929). In particular, Gerhard's wife, Maria, played these instruments well. We sang all kinds of songs: lullabies, children's songs, songs of youth, love songs, songs about nature and war, but always religious songs. We also sang Russian songs. However, we enjoyed singing songs about our homeland in particular. We put a lot of effort into collecting songs and poems. Each sibling had his or her own. My parents were interested in us keeping our notebooks of songs and poems. So, we had to take care of them, and write neatly by hand. Our parents added their sayings to one of our notebooks. Later on, those notebooks helped our parents recall their memories.

[193] In these years before the great turmoil began, there was a busy life in our German villages. No one had to complain about the intellectual decline of our people. And we

German speakers hardly paid attention to the political situation, just as we had ignored it during the First World War even though there were many indications of the coming crisis. Teachers had to speak Russian at school, while German was considered as a secondary subject only taught for two hours a week. The new curriculum did not include German literature. In schools, people spoke Russian almost entirely. Likewise, young people mainly used Russian when they were doing things on their own. There was no German language youth choir anymore. The Russification went on incessantly. Along this line, Germans also did not mind it anymore when young German adults married Russians (The Russians even welcomed this). Hence, the assimilation of Germans into Russian society began. Women became less interested in marrying German men.

Nevertheless, only a few Germans thought about immigrating to America. My father was one of those who believed that German-Russians lived in relative security. He did not want to stay because of his material possessions, but out of love for his homeland. My father was really attached to his home. He had put so much effort into building it. He had even overburdened himself necessitated by his large family, or so he thought. Now his family was small with only four members. Two children, Elvira and I, still lived at home. He cultivated 30 hectares of land. His equipment was new or in relatively good shape. Father possessed four gorgeous horses, cows, and young cattle. I had grown up, and I was adjusted to my circumstances. I took good care of our agricultural business. All inhabitants of the village accepted me as the head of the farm. I was successful and had self-confidence. Also, my religious life went well preparing for my baptism.

My brother Hans sent us a letter from Canada. He had faced some challenges at the beginning even though he had been able to take his wealth with him. He had been able to sell his farm without a problem. Additionally, we sent him money for his share of the threshing machine engine. (We were allowed to send 800 rubles per month to Canada.) We thought that we would have a tough time starting a new life from scratch in Canada, considering that Hans had to deal with so many difficulties. At that point, we still wanted to wait before leaving Russia.

In the meantime, the collectivization of land continued. All of Russia became public property with the state taking possession. Apart from taxes, the farmers were now obligated to pay rent for each hectare. From this time on, farmers did not own their land but rented it from the state for cultivation. Of course, the state had a say in what to do with its land. The Soviets hired agronomists to dictate how farmers cultivated land. Regulations were made on how agriculture should be done in the Soviet Union. [194] In 1928, the next step towards collectivization came. The government urged farmers to establish small societies. Five to six farmers formed a collective to cultivate their lands. The government sold them tractors and lent them money to purchase threshing machines that could be operated with the tractors. We had no option but to follow the other farmers who had gone ahead. To use tractors, you first need to instruct someone on how to use them. Who other than me could do this? I was excited to learn how to use a tractor, and later, to drive one. In spring, I was ready to take care of a tractor. I liked the machine (it was a Fordson), and the work went much faster with the tractor.

In spring 1929, we were all sowing. Everyone took care of their own fields. At this point, the land still belonged to us. We heard many displeasing rumours. This might be the last time we were going to sow and harvest on our own fields. As the situation became more threatening, each of us believed that we would be negatively affected by losing our farms if collectivization took place. This threat unsettled our village community. Without planning together, people sold whatever they could sell in secret, then drove to Moscow to get the documents necessary for emigrating to America. This happened more and more often. In the end, Germans from all over Russia gathered in Moscow. They rented small rooms in the Muscovites' summer cottages, dachas. This was the largest emigration movement of German-Russians that ever happened. (I've already spoken of this.)

The events between 1928 and 1929 ended the New Economic Policy era in my home village Nordheim (Russian: *Marinovka*). We were told that Lenin had inspired these policies that were introduced before the Russian economy ultimately collapsed. Obviously, the idea of these policies worked out, considering the good state of the vast country's population at the end of 1928. No one knows how things would have developed if the Soviets had adhered to Lenin's ideas of building a socialist country after 1928? However, not even one in a thousand Russians could have anticipated the horrible events that happened after 1929.

One thing was sure, Stalin dramatically changed the country's political direction. He had become the leader of the Soviet Union after Lenin's death on 21 January 1924, although Lenin did not want Stalin (Joseph Dschugaschwilli¹ was his real name) to gain power. Likewise, Stalin did not follow Lenin's path to build a new system or state. Rather, Stalin took the path of mass annihilation of human life, and economic ruin.

You can read about what happened to our home and our father and his family between 1923 and 1928 in the chapter about our parents. [195] As already mentioned, I married on 31 March 1930. In the following section, I will try to remember the reasons why I decided to marry. Why did I feel the desire? How did feelings between Katja and me develop? How did we find each other?

As far as I can remember, I felt strongly attached to my father from early childhood. It is normal that a child loves both their mother and father. But it was slightly different in my case. The reason for this might be that my father loved me differently than his other children. However, I am not sure about this. I guess I must be wrong. With certainty, my father did love all his children equally. We children could never say that he preferred one child over the other. I always wanted to be close to my father. I searched for him whenever he was not at home. I could not feel entirely myself until I found him. Especially in the winter, I loved it when he sat with my mother on the small couch bench next to the oven in our dining room, and I was allowed to join them. At this moment, I did not talk much. Instead, I listened keenly to my father, especially if he told us about his own life. We sometimes sang songs, or I was allowed to recite a poem that I had written in my poetry notebook. Apart from this, father did not forget to ask me about what I had done when he

¹ Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili

wasn't at home, and how I had done things. (I had begun to accomplish things when I was still in the cradle.) I also enjoyed keeping my father company while he had to work on the farmstead or in the garden. However, I would never leave him whenever he had been busy in the workshop. I could write many pages about my childhood time I spent with my father. But this is not my aim. I only want to report a related event.

It happened during the time after the mill had burned down. My father gradually became pessimistic. Then he had to save money. Consequently, he hardly bought anything for himself. But somehow he had lost his pocket knife. He did not feel comfortable without a knife. He used to say, "Every man must always wear a knife." One day, he returned home. (He was rarely that cheerful.) He had gone to a shop where he purchased a new knife. He showed it to us. It had a buckle, and was heavy. He liked his knife. Being happy about it, he took good care of it. He always had it in his right trouser pocket. However, one day, he wanted to take out the knife, but it was not there. He did not feel at ease anymore. As someone said that he might find the knife in another pocket or trouser, my father said sternly, "No. If I do not see it in my pocket, it will have been lost." With these words, the colour of my father's face changed, and he became sad, if not ill-tempered. "Are we not allowed to enjoy anything in our life? Must we receive our punishment immediately?" At that time, I did not know what my father's words meant. Today I know that my father wanted to say that it is a sin to cling too much to worldly things, otherwise, you will make them into idols. He looked for the knife everywhere he thought he might have lost it until my mother asked him to go to the store to purchase a new knife. He replied, "No, I won't find a knife like that again. It was the only knife that had a big handle perfect for my strong hands. If I bought the same knife twice, I would be ashamed if the shopkeeper found out that the knife dropped out of my pocket. [196] Furthermore, I have to accept my penalty for being too attached to that knife. I won't buy a new knife because I want to bear my punishment." That appeared to be the end of the story.

Even though he had given up his hope of finding the knife again, he went to the place where he thought he had lost it. This time, I was following him step by step. We both walked silently without saying a word. But then I knelt down and shouted—I suddenly had the knife in my own hands. Father immediately turned to me and grasped me, lifted me up in the air, and kissed me. He carried me a little in his strong arms and uttered, "You are a hero." After he had put me on the ground again, he continued, "So it happens. How often had I been walking around here without noticing the knife? Yet, I am tall, and I am looking upwards. This is why the knife escaped my attention even though it was very close to me. You are small, and you are looking down on the ground. You saw it. That's the way it should be. You are not supposed to stare at the sky all the time to see what is flying. Rather, you should look down on the ground so that you can observe what is crawling." I understood my father's words in my own terms: my father is tall, and his eyes are far away from the ground, so he couldn't spot the knife; by contrast, I am small, and my eyes are close to the ground, so I could catch sight of it. At this time, I did not understand the idea that it is better to humbly turn to mother earth than stare at cloud-castles in vain.

At home, we often repeated father's wise insight, and I was soon able to grasp its deeper meaning. I am convinced that it helped me in living my life. There were many opportunities

for me to kneel down during my life in Russia. However, other people are more capable of judging whether I really acted according to my father's ideal. Nonetheless, I tried my best.

There were several moments that showed how much our parents loved us. Feeling, deeply experiencing, and witnessing the love of my parents caused me to return their love. I believe that enjoying a tight family bond, and intimate relationship between my parents and me caused my first feelings of love. Today I know that I was already able to distinguish between love, appreciation, admiration, and etc., during my early childhood, even though I wouldn't have been able to verbalize my understanding of these differences.

Our parents always encouraged us to be very observant. Through this we didn't have to ask so many questions about all the phenomena we saw every single day. We would find out how these things came about on our own.

While I was growing up, I noticed that girls and boys behaved differently towards each other depending on whether they had to deal with peers of the same, or opposite sex. I became especially aware of this difference during my school years. In fact, I already knew a little bit about it.

When I was in a class taught by my sister Maria, as I was six years old. At the time of the First World War, the German speaking schools in Russia were closed. Students of very different ages attended this class back then, and I was the youngest. My classmates, both boys and girls, were two or even three years older than me. My peers were unable to continue their education for various reasons, and I hardly came in contact with them. [197] Nevertheless, I did not have any difficulties at school despite this age difference. All my classmates accepted me because I was one of the most gifted students. Furthermore, I changed from the second to third grade in the same year. That resulted in me being stuck between two age groups. On the one hand, my schoolmates were older than me; on the other, my playmates were one or two grades below me but I wasn't used to them. I usually spent my holidays and Sundays by myself. Another reason for my partial isolation was that I did not have many clothes. I did not have Sunday pants. I remember vividly how many troubles I had because of the pants I did have. At one point, they came up with a solution that on Sundays, I should put on my brother Gerhard's trousers. Indeed, that was a sort of solution. However, Gerhard had a short leg, so that one pant leg was too long. That gave me trouble. I had to remember to pull up the longer pant leg. But that was just the way it was. I had a more isolated life until 1922. I didn't feel lonely though. I enjoyed reading and writing. I was very advanced in learning compared with my older classmates, while they had more adolescent thoughts that are usual for 14 and 15-year-old boys. On Monday, they often talked about these stories. Hans showed an interest in Gretchen; Lena is enthusiastic about Heins, and so forth. However, everyone knew that Jakob Dueck and Maria Isaak were a couple. Jakob Dueck was my neighbour living across the street. He was three years older than me. Nevertheless, we were friends. Maria was a very popular girl. Jakob (age 15) and Maria (age 14) were both good looking. It is not surprising that those young people developed feelings for each other.

While we students had imaginings about their relationship—we assumed they loved each other—nothing happened between them in reality. We all thought that Jakob would

be very upset about Maria's illness that she had gotten after her impressive contribution to the Christmas performance. We were convinced that we would notice that Jakob was affected by this. To our surprise, we found that Jakob did not react to Maria's illness at all. Likewise, he did not appear to be aggrieved by her death. He did not show any emotion at all! He hadn't brought any rose to Maria's grave even though many roses were growing in their garden during spring. No one had seen Jakob visit her grave. While we were horsing around in the churchyard, he probably never even thought about Maria.

One day, some of us decided to assemble in the churchyard to sing "I saw a spring". We wanted to see how Jakob would react to our singing. I can still hear how my schoolmates and I sang back then. Where have all the playmates of my happy childhood gone? Here are the lyrics of this song:

[198]

I saw the spring and greeted the flowers
I listened to the nightingale's song, and kissed a beautiful girl
I sang about you, Spring, I liked you so much
But my beloved passed away like the nightingale's song
Oh, Father in heaven, you took my beloved
There may be other girls, but none of them can replace my beloved
She is resting here under the ground, roses are growing on her grave
Alas, I wish I could look at the girl who once brought me roses.
The lovely spring will return, all flowers will flourish again,
The nightingales will sing again, but my beloved Maria won't return.

Through this song, we wanted to stir up Jakob's feelings. We would like to have seen a tear running on his cheek. However, he did not show any emotions. He sang with us in his bass voice until the end of the song. We stood in silence. The girls stood up and went to Maria's grave. Roses were indeed growing on Maria's grave. Of course, they had not been planted by Jakob. We were all shocked by his coldness. All of us wondered whether Jakob had ever loved Maria even a little bit. A long time after that Sunday, we still looked at Jakob first, and then at ourselves whenever we met him. Had Jakob not loved Maria? No, that could not be the case. Maybe, he only liked her a little. Maybe his feelings to himself, to us, and to Maria were just pretending.

After I had finished school, I had to cope with my own misfortune because I could not continue studying. I was as lonely as I had been before. I had time and opportunity to reflect on events that had happened to my village and schoolmates. I read "*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*,"¹ "*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*,"² and other works by Goethe. I also began to write more.

In 1922, the harvest went better, but we had sown very little. Nevertheless, the situation did improve a little bit. We had enough to eat, and I got suitable pants and other things. In this way, I could immerse myself among people again without being ashamed. I continued

¹ The Sorrow of Young Werther

² Elective Affinities

to sing in the youth choir, and played guitar and mandolin. I sometimes went out. I remember how a big event was organized in the neighbouring village, Ebental, where the new school was located. The head of the school, F. Fröse, held a speech about “Truth, Moral Behavior, and Beauty.” It was an excellent speech! Moreover, I frequently participated in our young people’s games.

After that autumn harvest, we needed to get a lot of food for the animals. There were not many plants on the stubble fields. Therefore, we had skimmed the fields (that means we used a very flat plough without a sharp plough blade. We then harrowed the stubbles and the few plants we had. We sheared the bushes that were still green, the young branches of the mulberry hedge, and the cherry tree. In addition to this, we stacked brushwood so that we could feed the livestock with it. At the end of fall, we gathered the leaves that had fallen on the ground. Everything that horses, cows, and sheep could eat was stored in the barn. My brother Gerhard went to school in Nikolayevka. Late in the fall a family appeared in our village, a father with two or three sons, from Molotschna, the mother colony. These people seemed to be tired and malnourished. They had walked 150 or 200 kilometres to get to our peaceful village, Nordheim. Some time before, they had lived in our village. The father had two brothers living in Nordheim. The younger sibling lived at the family farm, while the other was a tenant. The returning brother was the oldest. He wanted to take shelter in Nordheim. [199] Even though the family was utterly impoverished, they were very well-mannered people. My parents had known them well. Being also members of Mennonite Brethren Church, the father of this family soon visited us to greet my father. Heinrich, the youngest of the three sons, accompanied him. He was one year older than me, and we soon became friends. Considering that he did not have other acquaintances in the village, he became a regular guest at our home. He was a gifted singer and was very interested in playing guitar. From then on, I did not feel lonely anymore. We were both happy, and so were our parents. However, his father soon brought two of his sons, including Heinrich, to relatives who lived 30-40 kilometres away from our village. Then we were separated from each other. Heinrich frequently visited his father or his other brother who lived with his uncle. I soon also became his friend too but he was three years older than me, and was quite timid. His very sick uncle and aunt asked him to do a lot of the work, but we became friends nevertheless.

In the winter of 1922 and 1923, I began to change my point of view a little. I reconsidered my attitude toward some essential questions of life, some existential questions. My way of perceiving and understanding became different. Had I reached adulthood? Was my childhood over? I think that was the case. I was 14 years old. What the Jew, Moheimov, had discussed with my father proved to be true. A new time had begun with general living conditions improving. We still had to be economical about everything, including food and feed. I was kept busy working with wood and metal. Confidence among the farmers grew. My role in our family, which had been diminished, now became more important. There was only Elvira, me and my parents left. I now had a “say.” My father consulted me like an adult. He could rely on me. Of course, my brother Hans lived nearby and was now very busy with his own farm. He had married the widow Justina (née Unger), who had been the wife of our dead neighbour Johann Toews. Likewise, my sister Liese had married. She only lived three farmsteads away from us. Meanwhile, my sister Tina had gained her independence, and worked in a hospital. My

brother Gerhard was employed at a school. Now it was my turn to do something with my life. I felt a keen sense of responsibility, and father was content with me. The young people of our village had also changed. We were holding together, reasonable and balanced. They often invited me to their celebrations, but I still spent most of my time at home because I had a lot to do there. I enjoyed working at the homestead, and on the fields. In the evening, I stayed in my room (I now had my own) sitting in front of the desk reading or writing in my notebooks unless I went to choir practice. My friend Heinrich returned around spring. His mother had moved into the village with three younger children, but I hadn't really noticed. The younger people, including me, started to wear better clothing due to the improving economy. Of course, they also wanted to show off. Social activities, like those initiated by the youth in Peter Dueck's family across the street, helped bring the entire youth of the village together successfully. [200] The Dueck family had two young men and women who were my classmates. They were happy, friendly, and enjoyed organizing gatherings. The spring of 1923 began with singing and music. I didn't know what was really happening.

It was a warm and sunny Sunday in spring. I sat at my desk to read a book that I wanted to finish that day. I watched some of my peers from the window, and saw them go up the steps of a house. The parents living there had gone to an event. (During my youth, we used to call such houses "numbers.") Sundays, young people liked to gather in these "numbers" and had access to the living rooms where they could behave more freely than usual not being under adult observation and constraints. This wasn't to hide our activities from our parents. However, we really enjoyed singing at our youth parties. We sometimes behaved more wildly than at home with our own families. Our generation was not an exception to any other. Some of the older people said that we were more adept at organizing our amusements more carefully than they had during their youths. I did not have any plans for this particular Sunday except to attend the regular gathering in the evening. On this occasion, I intended to meet Heinrich.

While reading, I was distracted by the sound of people laughing. When I looked across the street at the entrance of the house there, I caught sight of three girls turning into the street. I could only glimpse their backs, but soon identified Maria Dueck, and her sister Lena heading towards their house. I wondered who the girl was walking between them. She was a good-looking girl with bright, curly, neat hair. She wore a decent spring dress, and had a braid that went straight down her back. I felt myself begin to blush. I had never seen such a girl before. Who was she? Who was the girl with the bright, curly hair, and the long thick braid? The girls suddenly turned around, and came back close to my window. Now I could see her face. To prevent them from seeing me through the window, I stood up from my stool, stepping back a little bit into my room. I had looked closely at the face of this unfamiliar girl. The girls stood still as if they might decide to stay in front of my window allowing me to watch. I was even more shocked by this since I was aware that this surely was a coincidence. What happened then? Who was the enchanting girl who had the head of an angel? Who had brought her to my window? Why was I so nervous? In a minute, the three girls moved on so that I couldn't see them anymore. They went in the direction they had come. I sat down at my desk to continue to read my book. Just then, my friend Heinrich came into my room. I was happy that someone had come so I could discuss what

had happened. After I had related it to him, he began to smile and said, “I know this girl very well. It is my sister Kati (Katharina).”

[201] Since Heinrich noticed that I was surprised, he explained that his family consisted of parents, five brothers, and one sister. She was one year younger than him. I did not let him know about the feelings I had for her at that moment. Yet, I thought to myself, “She is the same age as me.” I also felt increased sympathy for my friend as Heinrich told me more about this family. He stressed the poverty the family had experienced in the last couple of years. His father made his living by woodworking. But because the family was landless, they always had had to live modestly. During the famine in 1921, they had to slaughter the only horse they had owned to eat it because the situation had become worse and worse. But the horse meat had tasted good. While he was telling me this story, I thought about how we had shot two horses as well. Yet, we had not eaten the meat ourselves, but we had fed it to the winter pigs. I was ashamed, and did not tell my friend. Afterwards, Heinrich’s family also had to slaughter their last cow, but someone the meat was stolen. The thieves had entered their house through a basement window. As a result, the family had no food left. Heinrich stopped speaking for a while. I had time to tell myself that we had not suffered as much scarcity as Heinrich’s family. Then he continued. At last, they even had had to kill their dog. Before I was able to rebuke this action, he interrupted me, “I know. But what can you do if you don’t have anything to eat for several days?” His father had slaughtered the dog alone without letting his family know about it. He cleaned the meat and returned home. The entire family was happy about it because they finally had something to eat again. At that point, they did not know that they were eating their own dog. While my friend was telling the story, I just thought about the gentle girl with curly hair and the long thick braid. I imagined how she had to eat dog too.

We were silent for a while. Heinrich and his older brother had had to live at the home of some relatives. Two families who were related to them allowed one of the brothers to stay with each of them. The boys had to take care of the livestock. In turn, they could eat with the family. These people still had enough food. I asked Heinrich how his family wanted to continue to live in the village. Heinrich replied, “At the moment, I don’t know.” However, I was aware that the people with whom they lived didn’t have much. These people were Heinrich’s father’s younger brother and his wife, who were very stingy. I had come into contact with all the inhabitants of the village when I had to ride through the village. I knew each farmer all too well. They would not get much food at their uncle Jakob’s and aunt Lena’s home. I did not say anything about that though. Heinrich continued, “I will be coming home soon, and then we will meet each other again.” I nodded to him and listened to his comforting words. Yet, something was going on in my heart. I could feel a swelling lump in my throat. It seemed that it wanted to take my breath away. [202] Heinrich noticed that I did not feel well. Before he could say anything about it, I already got a little bit better and told him that I was ok. At that moment, I was not thinking about Heinrich or myself, but the dog, and the girl with the face of an angel. What had he called her? He referred to as “Kati.” Katja was her name. I would nickname her “Katjuscha” or “Kotchen,” if she would allow it.

Heinrich asked me, “Are we going to the evening service? I will have to leave very early tomorrow. My father is going to bring me to Alexanderpol,” the village where his

relatives lived. "My brother Peter has already arrived, and my brother Johann will also live with uncle Johann and aunt Neta. He will support my sick aunt." I said yes to Heinrich's proposal because I was confident that at the service I would meet his sister as well. In the evening, we met at Nordheim's assembly hall. It was located on the farm of the Dueck family that was across the street from my home. During the civil war years, the local council had rented the house next to this farm as an assembly hall because driving to the central assembly had become difficult. There was a lack of horses, and it was dangerous to drive due to marauding gangs. My assumption proved to be accurate. I saw the new girl with curly, bright hair, and the long thick braid walking in front of us. I was now able to observe how she was up close. Window glass does not reveal every detail to the observer despite its transparency. However, my first impression had not been wrong. She looked just the same as when I had spotted her through the window. None of my peers (and I met many more than Heinrich) noticed at whom I was looking. When I realized that Katja blushed, I abruptly turned my head in another direction. Had I made her nervous by directly looking at her, considering she had no idea about my interest in her? I was sorry about that. We boys sat in the back rows that were reserved for men. The girls passed by without paying us any attention. They sat in the middle rows reserved for women. Katja's profile was now in my field of vision. When she moved a little bit to the side, I was able to catch sight of her face. That evening, most things the preacher said escaped my attention. I had to do something more meaningful. I enjoyed looking at the lovely face, the bright and curly hair, the long, thick braid, the face that I had not known or seen the day before. Katja's appearance had disrupted my tranquility.

When the last amen of the evening service had been spoken, and the people had risen from their seats, we stood up, and left the room first. The girls passed by, and sat down on a bench outside the entrance. We went to the street where Heinrich said goodbye to his other friends. Meanwhile, I was listening to the things that were happening on the bench in front of the house. I could not get everything that was said, but I perceived that they were happy, and heard what they were calling each other. Heinrich and I went across the street where we stood at a gate to talk about something. The girls passed us while they cheerfully chatted with each other, and disappeared into the darkness. Heinrich and I said our goodbyes, [203] and I went slowly to my own door.

I once more looked at the girls' faces from some distance when they were passing me. I also heard how they called each other by their nicknames. Indeed, her friends called her Katja. At one point, everything around me became silent. Standing in front of the door I watched the set of the waxing moon, and the incredibly starry sky. When I entered my house. I went to my room, sat down at my desk, and pondered what I had seen. I caught myself being nervous. What had happened to me? My home was completely silent. Everyone was resting except me. I sat there for a while musing. Then I seized paper and pen, and wrote the following poem.

Seeing you for the first time,
This moment is unforgettable,
Your presence enchanted me,
I no longer understand my heart.
How much I enjoyed listening to you talk!

I was delighted whenever I heard your cheerful voice.
Alas, if I had had the opportunity, and dared it,
I would have told you that I loved you.

It would be a long time before I would declare my love for her since I was such a shy person, and had not practiced enough to be successful with women. For this, you needed confidence, and a particular form of creativity. Unfortunately, I lacked both qualities, and the winter of 1923-1924 was approaching. In summer we had not seen each other often because everyone was too busy working. The village assembly had been closed. People could now gather in the central church again because the economy had improved under to the New Economic Policy. However, we rarely went to church.

The spring, summer, and fall had passed by while we had been hard working with success. We had filled not all, but most of our storerooms toward before the start of winter. No one had to stay hungry. Everyone had enough to eat this year. We also had harvested a sufficient amount of fodder for our livestock. I was especially happy that my father fulfilled the request of a landless farmer in our village. The latter had asked my father whether he could rent one hectare of land to sow millet. The farmer thought that he would have enough porridge to support his family during winter, provided that harvest would be good. He told my father that he had enough seeds to realize his plan. My father replied that he would like to rent his land, but instead, he would give him the land rent free for his millet. The farmer thanked my father, adding that he would sow and harrow by hand. Father told him that we would sow for him, but we didn't have millet, otherwise, we would have provided him with seed too. Now fall began, and the millet was ripe. The farmer had harvested the millet with his scythe by himself. He had not informed us about this. However, he had to thresh it, and he did not know how to do that. How should he get rid of the straw and chaff that you get when you are threshing? [204] Father told him that we would thresh it with our threshing machine, but that he should take the straw and chaff to feed his calf since they were good fodder. The farmer was able to support one calf with his farm income. Soon afterward, we threshed the millet. Father encouraged him not to be reluctant to take a wagon to bring his millet to the mill. The farmer joyfully returned to his family. I was even happier than he was. Neither the farmer or my father were aware of how much I enjoyed secretly doing something beneficial for this farmer's family. My father did not know that this farmer was the father of the nice girl with bright, curly hair, and the long thick braid, or that I had feelings for this wonderful girl. Katja's father didn't know about it either. At this point no one could predict if this girl would ever fall in love with me.

Winter began. It became cold, and snow fell. We anticipated a tough winter, and needed to take all the necessary measures to prevent the severe frost from invading our house and barn. Those wise with experience expected a freezing winter, and advised everyone to have enough fuel supply. For the first time since the revolution, coal from the mine was available on the free market. We purchased a good load of coal so didn't have to worry about winter.

School started again too. Some of my friends with whom I had attended the village school (Kornelius Klassen, Abram Unruh, and so forth) went each day to the secondary school in Ebental. On the coldest days, they would rent temporary accommodation from

locals. How did I spend my time? Most of the time, I worked at home, and in the barns. I particularly enjoyed working in our workshop. One day, when it had already become quite cold, my father drove to Grischino [Pokrovsk], the city closest to us. He returned home with a small cast-iron stove for the workshop. From now, I was able to heat my workplace so that it was comfortable. Apart from this, my father bought a bracket ring, a carriage spoke, and other helpful tools. I was adjusting to work at developing the mid-sized agricultural business. Since it was what father wanted, I had to do it. Moreover, my hope to continue faded away since I gradually dedicated more and more time to traditional farm work. To sooth myself somewhat, I intended to spend the long winter evenings reading and writing as much as I could. I also engaged in other activities: singing, writing songs and other things. And of course, I joined in the gatherings of my peers. It was like an irresistible magnet attracted me. I really wanted to keep myself busy during the coming winter. The roaring livestock began returning from the meadow earlier than each previous day in rain and snow. Days were getting shorter, and winter began.

[205] Our youth choir again met to practice under the guidance of our teacher Gerhard Neufeld. Every Sunday, we gathered in the school. We had a good time, and our teacher enjoyed working with us. We also met one time during the week. Of course, Katja also joined the choir. She was a good and confident alto singer. I sang tenor. Her brother Johann sang bass. Heinrich was living in Alexanderpol at the time. Katja and I saw each other at the Sunday meetings that again were taking place in the villages. Furthermore, we sometimes met when our youth gathered to play games. However, we did not reveal our inner feelings to each other when we met. We did not know how we felt for each other. I treated Katja politely and attentively just like I behaved towards other girls. Katja was naive and indifferent to me. She did not show any sign of affection for me. In general, she treated all boys the same. She did not prefer one over the other. That calmed me down even though I often felt differently. Inside, I was tied up in knots! Overall, Katja was a merry girl with a friendly look, and creative ideas. What marked Katja out was her singing. Considering that I also enjoyed singing, and knew plenty of songs, people started to speak about us, "If Katja and David meet, they will sing. Their singing connects them." In a short time, Katja became popular in our group. Both boys and girls liked to socialize with her. I was happy about her popularity. That was my wish, indeed. My impression of her was very accurate.

Weeks and months passed. The harsh winter brought an unusually deep layer of snow. The farmers interpreted this as a sign of a good harvest to come. They always tempered this prediction with the prospect of winter wheat perishing if it is under water at spring thaw, and then freezes. Furthermore, the ground heaves when it freezes, and can rip the roots off the plants. Farmer's moods oscillate between hope, and fear at winter's end. But as the weather warmed, and the sun's rays made the snow disappear, the farmers became more and more optimistic.

In the winter there had been so much snow that it could not be shoveled from the boardwalks at the fences along the street. So, people decided to only keep a path for sleighs cleared of snow in the middle of the street. Villagers also walked there. Whenever new snow fell, they would harness a horse to a sleigh and drive along the street several times. Some farmers took care of this, especially farmers who had young people at home. When

they were clearing the road, the younger folks enjoyed snowball fights. We were loud, and horsed around on the road. Young couples joined in this activity. There were high snow drifts in town and countryside, and it was hard to avoid sleighs crashing into one another. Moreover, deep ruts developed in the compressed snow making it even more difficult. [206] As far as the farmers could remember, there had only been more snow in the winter of 1918-1919. I can recall that winter very vividly. Snow had been so deep you could only see the tops of the fruit trees. And then it had suddenly melted with much damage to the fruit trees. By contrast, this spring the snow gradually melted, and there was a lot of melt water, but it didn't cause major damage. It was a magnificent spring. The hard freeze had not affected the winter wheat. Everyone felt relieved after the meltwater had completely disappeared from the fields.

It had been years since the farmers sowed their fields, every piece of land they had, with much enthusiasm. Apart from humans, creation enjoyed the vitality of spring. All beings looked to the future with hope.

Two events shaped the spring of 1925. The first event pertained to the Memrik Settlement. In our area, we never experienced such an extensive May Day celebration. This year, the entire population of the German area in the Memrik Settlement celebrated May Day for the first time. Students from all ten villages attended. Many adults joined them. F. Froese, head of the secondary school at Ebental, opened the celebration with a speech. After this, adult choirs sang, followed by students performing poems, and the student choirs. Our youth choir, under the supervision of Gerhard Neufeld, had a performance as well. We received enthusiastic and prolonged applause. From this time on, May Day celebrations always took place in the same forest.

The second event pertained primarily to the inhabitants of Nordheim. It was less cheerful than the May Day celebration. No, this celebration unsettled us, in fact with villagers having two different emotional responses when they attended. We had to say goodbye to our highly appreciated teacher, and youthful friend Gerhard Neufeld. He had worked as a teacher in Nordheim for five years. He had gained everyone's affection and respect. However, he now left Nordheim, and the school that he had learned to appreciate over the years. In so doing, he also emigrated from his native country, Russia, where he had been born and raised, studied, worked, and established his own family, to Canada. He loved his native land, but it had become foreign to him. He could not feel that he was a free man anymore in his own country. He was unable to come to terms with the new educational agenda that the Soviet government had imposed on all schools, without exception. He did not accept that education should be without religion. That was against his conscience. Considering that he could not change anything about it, he decided to leave. All villagers were aggrieved by his decision. However, they also hoped that he would succeed in immigrating to a country where he could continue to work as a teacher according to his values. At his farewell celebration, his youth choir sang for him, and said their farewells. He had founded, taught, and supervised the choir with whom he enjoyed working. We would all miss him.

[207] That spring, all villagers, but especially the youth, had an excellent Easter feast. For the first time, our neighbours, who lived across the street, erected a swing that was very

stable and high. All the young people used this swing as a meeting point. It became a great pleasure for the young. My friends and I, who had been regarded as youngsters, were now welcomed to join the group of the older young adults. After a short time, they completely respected us because we were peaceful most of the time, and we were very disciplined. As usual, Katja and I were the youngest members of the group. Nonetheless, we were already 16 years old, and we knew what life was about.

As always happens when people are young—this will never change—some girls and boys start to treat each other differently. At first, he looks at her, and she then blushes. Later, he somehow gets to hold her hand. She blushes again, but doesn't stop him. When the group disperses, he asks whether he is allowed to keep her company, and takes her silence as consent. Of course, events sometimes take another turn. In short, let us recall how the saying goes, "They are finding each other," or "They have found each other." People take this first meeting seriously. How close the bond between them can become! Time tells whether the first attraction develops into appreciation, or even into love. However, every couple has their own particular story to tell. At the end of the day, newlyweds often say that they do not know how it happened when asked how their relationship began. That reminds me of the following verses:

Tell me, what is the origin of love? Does love come and stay?
Tell me, how does love fade to disappear? In this case, it was not love.

Weeks and months passed. The spring of 1925, and because of such favourable weather that we anticipated a good harvest the following summer. This meant we had to purchase more machinery. A Mennonite organization was founded that managed to import goods from America. We were able to equip our threshing machines with engines. We needed to work without rest to accomplish all that was necessary without much time for leisure. Everyone did what was necessary to capitalize on the yield of harvest. Indeed, greed had not died out. There was an ongoing competition about who would harvest the most. The farmers' industriousness paid off. The harvest was very good with farmers doing their best to gather in the harvest. Churches celebrated a beautiful and prosperous Thanksgiving.

After Thanksgiving festivities, we had to do the autumn work. This duty was fulfilled in a well-organized manner. The vast majority of people were happy, thankful and content. [208] Yearly events followed the path determined by nature's cycle. The fall began everywhere. The migrating bird flew away across continents and oceans. Indian summer would soon end, and we were finishing the preparatory work for winter. Yet there were some warm sunny days now and then. The youth began talking about the choir practice hour that would resume soon.

The choirmaster Peter Voth, who had been in charge of the religious choir for several years, already anticipated new singers joining the choir this year. We were also looking forward to this. New songbooks were eventually acquired. Members bought thick notebooks in which to copy the songs we would practice this year. This was how the youth got ready for winter in their own way. Some wedding ceremonies were excitedly anticipated by all. Others regretted that the beautiful time was ending, a time when they

had walked hand in hand, or had linked arms with each other. They had been eager to sit together on a lonely garden bench, or under a tree standing in the middle of the meadow. There intimate conversation, without interference from others, were possible. Only the silent moon was permitted to be the third wheel in their tête-à-tête. Everyone was aware that this was no different than their ancestors, but no one knew how, when or why people had begun to behave in this way, or who had invented this sort of pastime. Everyone accepted that this would be kept secret. All of us had to acknowledge that we acted on our own. I also became increasingly aware of this, but I concluded that it did not make sense to rush into anything. By contrast there was a certain danger in it. I wanted to be patient, although my bosom friend (??) gave me some hints. I also sometimes got the impression that the ice between me and my beloved was melting. It could also be that a few experiences I had had over the years boosted my confidence.

It happened on one warm Sunday evening when I had already put a book on my desk. I wanted to spend the evening on my own since I knew that some of my friends did not attend today's service. My friend (??) was not available since Katja and her entire family were away. Heinrich and Peter were visiting their relatives in Alexanderpol before it became too muddy and cold during the late fall. We also had not seen each other the previous Sunday because the weather was terrible all day to the point that no one had been interested in even leaving the house. Accordingly, it was two weeks previously that I had last seen Katja. I felt deep emptiness. Was Katja feeling the same? Did she miss my presence? I hoped that she yearned for me. Now I would have to wait until the choir practice on Friday before seeing her or even talking to her.

Absently, I opened one of my notebooks where I had written songs. I found the following verses that I had already read over several times. I had never recited them in public. I found that there had not been the right time to do that. [109] I had to read it for myself, and I read the following verses¹:

Dear Moon, you are silently walking over the evening sky.
You are peaceful while I feel restless.
It saddens me to observe your calm and serene orbit.
Alas, how hard is my fate that prevents me from following your example!

Dear Moon, I can reveal to you why my heart is aggrieved.
I can tell you about whom this sad soul thinks when she is bitterly mourning.
Dear Moon, you should know about it since you know how to keep silent.
You should know why I am shedding tears, and about what my heart is sad.

You can spot a tiny cabin in the valley, where the dark forest stands.
It is close to the waterfall. Walk through the forest, the brooks and meadows!
Just gently peep through the window!
You will then see the queen among girls!!!

You will notice that this girl does not wear gold or silk.

¹ German folk song: *Dear Moon, you are walking in silence*

Memories of His Homeland

My girl only has decent and pretty clothes.
My girl is not highly appreciated because of her noble birth, her class,
or other things that are valued. She is not a nun.

I only love her because of her lovely, good heart.
She is gentle when she is serious; she is merry when she jokes.
Everything is good about her.
Her gestures are expressive, her eye serene and happy.
In short, I believe that I would be blessed if she loved me.

Moon, you are the friend of the purest feelings.
Please, creep into her small room.
Tell her that I love her, that she is my only pleasure, joy, delight.
In fact, she is all I have. Tell her I want to grieve if she is grieving.

Relate to her that I already feel attachment to her.
Unfortunately, the time of my sweet freedom went by too quickly.
Say that I cannot love without sin living in this world.
Ask my beloved girl whether she accepts my love.

Musing about these verses, trying to grasp the main idea of the poem, made me imagine situations similar to mine. These thoughts calmed me. Later, I again felt doubts, considering that I loved her did not mean that she loved me. Another poet wrote, "At that time, I loved you so much that I would have kissed your footprints. I would have done everything for you. Nonetheless, you never loved me." Suddenly, I thought to myself, "You cannot become weak! Look at yourself soberly, and optimistically! You are both still young." With this thought, I closed my notebook, put it in my table drawer, and leaned over my book to read.

Behind the wall, the wall clock was beating. I counted until it struck nine. I opened the window in front of my desk and smelled the autumn flowers blossoming in front of the window. Their scent merged with the pure evening air. That day might have been the last warm day for the fall. I started to pay attention to the content of the book that lay in front of me. Now I was completely alone.

Or was I? I was wrong about that. While I was sitting with my head leaning over my book, some autumn flowers tied together with their stems fell directly onto the book in front of me. The kerosene lamp that stood a little bit to the side prevented me from immediately looking through the open window. So, I ran out of the house into the street. I didn't see anyone! The evening was peaceful! The silent moon was smiling at me. The moon seemed to say, "I told her what you said." [210] Uncertain, I returned to my room with the open book. Three autumn flowers laid on my book. They probably belonged to those blossoming in front of my window. I grasped the flowers and counted them: faith, love, and hope. Who had given me flowers? It was not Katja. It was unlikely that she had gone out so late in the evening considering that she must have returned home pretty late.

What to do about it? I thought about the moon. The moon would have been able to tell me who had done this, but the moon was silent.

I wanted to continue reading my book, but I was unable to stay focused. I closed the book and the window, blew out the lamp, and went to bed. I laid in bed for some time with my eyes shut, but without falling asleep pondering who had done this and why—the moon, the flowers, and the angel of the night. I counted the strikes of the clock. It was eleven o'clock. I had many guesses, but I could not decide who was responsible for the flowers. I recalled a Russian proverb, “The morning is wiser than the evening.”

I couldn't remember on Monday morning just when I had fallen asleep. No one can. The weather seemed to be fair, so I went to the field with the plough. The fall work was not yet entirely finished. The weather was stable enough to plough the last field of stubble. While doing this I couldn't stop thinking about Sunday's flowers. I hoped that I might be able to find more about it on Friday at the first choir practice. During the practice, I examined all participants' faces, but I couldn't sense anything unusual. As the crowd of young people left the room, Katja stepped to my side, and asked me why I had not visited her on Sunday evening! I replied that I hadn't been hiding, but sitting in front of my open window. She then blushed. I asked her whether she had seen me. This question made her blush more. She said, “Are you angry with me?” While we were walking side by side, I took her hands, and said, “Why should I be mad at you? I am grateful. Can I walk you home?” She remained silent, but she held my hand very tightly. One or two other couples passed by, and went ahead of us. I thought, silence is an answer, too. I linked my arms with her. We slowly walked across the street so that we were the last to arrive there. While ambling, Katja told me that she had returned from Alexanderpol very early on Sunday. When she had attended the service with some other girl, she had not been able to find me despite the fact that I always went to the church service. Then she passed my window, had seen me, and wanted to greet me. I asked her whether she enjoyed my company at the gathering. She replied, “I feel lonely when you are not there.” At this, I asked Katja my last question, “Do you have the feeling that we are meant to be together?” At this point, we arrived at the entrance of her house. She stood directly in front of me and said, “Everyone assumes so.” I answered her that we didn't have to consult other people, but trust our convictions. While I said this, she put her hands on my shoulders, and gave me a look that revealed how she felt without saying a word. I ask you, dear readers (you who will read these lines someday, as I hope), is it difficult to guess what happened next?

[211] We hadn't planned but couldn't change what happened. We kissed for the first time. You know what kissing does, so I don't have to elaborate. I experienced the same thing that you, at some point, have experienced. I only want to add that the mutual feelings between Katja and me have not changed since that day in 1925. We might only have changed the way we show our love to each other. Outwards expressions, however, are secondary to the principle, and play only a minor role. In the opposite case, if we put more emphasis on the expression than on the principle, we would corrupt the principle. We will not necessarily turn it on its head, but we would compromise, or even worse, we might become hypocrites, imposters, traitors. I do not think that I am wrong. Maybe, someone cannot believe what I am saying. They might ask, “How can you not have any problem with each other being married for 55 or 60 years?” I do not make that claim. In my opinion,

it would be an illusion to think that you can be married without having any disagreements. Those are unavoidable even in the happiest marriages. Being prepared to compromise is a necessary condition for a happy marriage. As long as humans are unmarried, they are independent of the opinion of another person. Therefore, they do not have to bow to the opinions of others. However, it is an offence against nature to live alone, as the life of the first people on earth illustrate. It is also beyond doubt that there could ever be two humans who always think alike about everything. It is impossible that they come to the same conclusions, and understand the same event in exactly the same way. There is no reason to doubt that spouses need to cooperate to have a peaceful life together. Consequently, you should only imagine that a successful married life is a sequence of compromises.

In my father's family, we often had discussions about marriage. From my childhood onwards, I was a keen observer of many people's marriages to learn from them. Fortunately, I had been able to attend many weddings before we got married. I had also encountered many couples during my life. I had heard about the matriarchal and patriarchal principles since I was always interested in human history.

During the years of the New Economic Policy, the Soviet Union did not interfere in the religious life of the population, apart from schools. Considering that our parents were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, it did not surprise us that our parents and other members of the church motivated us to join this church, too. Of course, we should not take this step as mere formality. We were expected to transform our way of life, to convert, to get baptized and so forth. It was obvious to me that we needed to study the Bible as a prerequisite. [212] We needed to gain knowledge and conviction in order to understand and confess our belief. Considering that it became increasingly clear to me that we would marry in the following years, I studied what the Bible taught about marriage. It was not a burden to me to obtain an overview of how the Bible approaches marriage, the wedding ceremony, and married life. I also learned how the Bible's understanding of marriage changed from the first humans until Jesus' time. (So as to not digress from the story of my wedding, I will not describe my studies here, but I will write about them further in the chapter "About my Religious Convictions and How They Have Changed.")

Here, I only want to show some points that the Bible made about marriage. Adam and Eve were not a married couple in today's understanding of marriage. God created both of them to propagate the human species (Genesis 1:28). He ordered Eve to be Adam's helper; however, she proved to be fateful for Adam. "The woman you put here with me..." (Genesis 3: 12). Love did not play a role for Adam and Eve. In Genesis 11: 29, we can read that Abraham and Nahor had to choose wives. Arguably, these men had some feelings for their wives. However, you cannot see that Abraham loved Sarah. The fact that he denied his marriage twice (Genesis 12:13 and Genesis 20:2) indicates that Abraham did not love Sarah. You can read that Isaac developed feelings towards Rebecca (Genesis 24: 67), but he also did not support her. Like his father, he denied that he was married to her (Genesis 26: 7). We often read that "a man chose a woman," but this does not imply that they got married. The men took possession of women by stealing (Judges 20), buying (Jacob asked Laban for this), or capturing them. Saul gave his daughter Michal to David in exchange for 100 Philistines' foreskins (1 Samuel 18:27). Later, David took two other wives, Ahinoam and Abigail (1 Samuel 27:3). David already had six wives when he took Michal from her

husband, Palti (2 Samuel 3:14). He caught sight of Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah. He then ordered Uriah killed, and took Bathsheba as his wife. What are we supposed to think about King Solomon's marriages? Solomon had many wives of different nationalities. He ended up having seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:1 and 11:3). In this period of time, no one said that you should love your wife. They only wanted to satisfy their carnal desires. (To use a modern word, they were whoring around.) What do you think?

In the New Testament, you can read that a man should marry a woman. That poses the question of what sort of relationship between man and woman the New Testament promotes. The wife should submit herself to her husband, and fear him (Ephesians 5:22 and 33, Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1 and 7). In general, Paul was against marrying, but he accepted that people got married. It was not such a long time ago that people were not allowed to choose their spouses. Instead, parents, relatives, and so forth, decided.

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament provides a role-model for marriage based on mutual affection or love. There is also no suggestion on how to conduct a wedding ceremony. In the episode of the marriage at Cana, the Bible also does not depict a marriage ceremony. Here, the Bible is concerned about food, clothing, jewelry, and the consumption of wine. Jesus even worries about whether there is enough wine. You also do not find texts in the Bible that address a wedding ceremony. Modern Christians only re-purpose random Bible quotes for this. All these points indicate that we now have a different attitude toward marriage. [213] Our answers to the questions of why we marry, and how to lead a married life are different from the Bible. In other words, we build and cultivate our family culture differently. We do not want to have a family life as described in the Bible.

Katja and I had also wanted to have a modern family life. We were pretty young. Nonetheless, we decided that we would not lead our family traditionally, that some people still often follow at our time. However, we did want to serve as role models by introducing a new lifestyle. We refused the idea that one partner must be subordinated to the other, or needed to fear.

Time did not stop, and the years flew by. We continued to attend the youth gatherings and engage in their games and singing. Likewise, we did not stop going to choir practice. We only met on Sundays or Saturday evenings. We were happy when we met on some occasions, or saw each other by accident. However, we were not sad when we had to depart from each other. We never thought we could get annoyed at each other. There were no instances that made us suspicious or jealous. We were eager to be open to everything, and transparent to each other. Of course, we needed to practice this attitude. However, these exercises made us more trustworthy and reliable. Our friendship got closer and stronger. We did not keep it secret. We did not conceal our relationship from our parents or other people because we did not know any reason why we should be secretive. We behaved properly and honourably. This attitude made our love stronger. Indeed, we loved each other truly from the bottom of our hearts. Our love was decent and profound.

Yet my readers might assume that we had always been lucky, and we never had to deal with difficulties, as if we would have had a trouble-free life bestowed on us. That would

have been nice, indeed. But that wasn't the case. Nonetheless, we were given many roses in the most beautiful bloom. Some of them had the longest and spikiest thorns, but were not gifts we could refuse. If it had been different, we would have been living in a fantasy world. A long time before, a poet had written the following: "There is no rose without thorns. There is no love without pain." Life resembles sunshine with both light and shadow. We had to experience temptations and spiritual crises, but that didn't mean we had to surrender to them. We both cried and cheered together. We felt hatred and sadness together. We had to cope with irreplaceable losses, but we had achievements. We physically experienced how malice and hypocrisy were produced by unimaginable wickedness. We lost, and then regained our belief in true justice. Like a sly snake, our archenemy hid in the grass. In bushes, and on meadow paths edged by flowers, he lay in wait for us. We both walked there, holding each other's hands. I hope that God will allow me to comment on the lines.

[214] Five years passed. We were married on 31 March 1930. Both Katja's parents and mine had hoped for this decision, and sanctioned our life together. We asked Johann Martin Janzen, who was a preacher and elder of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Memrik, to perform the wedding ceremony. He was related to Katja and a good friend of my parents. He knew both of us very well, and asked during our marriage preparation whether we had agreed on our marriage vows. Johann Janzen was aware that there was often disagreement about this. There had been controversies about this topic in our church community, too. I immediately understood what he wanted to say, and I answered that I did not intend to rule over my wife. Nor did I want my wife to be my servant. We had both agreed that I would be the head of our marriage, as indicated by the fact that we would adopt Toews as our surname. Johann Janzen gave us a nice look and said, "That sounds good to me." Our preacher Janzen selected Psalm 1:3 as our wedding verse. "That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither; whatever they do prospers."

His sermon about this Psalm was suitable guidance for our married life. We are still grateful to him. He died as a martyr—we wept for him. It is not difficult to get the main idea of the verse quoted above, but in reality, it is challenging to adhere to it. Nonetheless, we tried our best, and we had some success.

Our preacher, Janzen, replaced the conventional wording of the marriage vows that says, "Will you obey your husband and fear him," by "Will you love and respect your husband." We were content with his decision. We also said yes when he asked us, "Will you stay together until death parts you?" Afterwards, we had a traditional Mennonite wedding celebration with our friends and relatives' congratulations, a feast with coffee and zwieback. In the evening, the young people enjoyed games, singing, and making music. We did not dance. My parents did not forbid it but they wouldn't have liked it. We did not want to do anything of which they would not approve. Our young adult friends all understood that. At the end of our wedding ceremony, we sang the song, "After life begins, something will immediately happen." Many elderly people joined in the singing. It was not customary to sing this at the end of a wedding, but in our case, people thought that the song suited since we did not expect an easy future. Here is the song.

After life begins
A child will already cry
His mother will greet it with tears of joy
She will kiss the baby for the first time
While you grow up, you experience joy and grief
Love then touches the young heart
The heart reveals its feeling to the young girl
The tear she sheds
Quietly says, I love you.

The tears of a young bride are beautiful
When the groom looks into her eyes
They bond together in marriage
Then the struggles and worries begin.
[215] And if the man gives up all his hope
The women will still look trustfully at
The bright sky and the infinite light of the sun
And one tear will say, Do not give up!

The man turns to a very old man who will soon die
His family is deeply moved and gathers around him
With their eyes full of tears
They show their love to him for the last time
Yet, the old man also looks up for the last time
Surrounded by his children and grandchildren,
One of his tears speaks quietly, See you again!
While the old man passes away.

We Start an Independent Life

We were still young then, 21 years old. We knew things wouldn't be easy for us, and expected many difficulties. We began our preparations for encountering and tackling them. We would eventually overcome.

We could not expect to receive dowries from our parents. Katja's and my parents had lost everything when they had unsuccessfully tried to emigrate. Now they only had their houses. Each of us had a thin mattress and the necessary clothing. Nonetheless, we had our parents' blessing, and we worked hard. Apart from this, Katja had received good training for sewing and tailoring. She knew many things that were essential for keeping a proper household. I was knowledgeable about wood and metal working. I could fabricate many things, and also had some understanding of mechanics. But the most precious gift we had was our confidence and courage. All these things helped us to begin our life together.

I worked in construction 15 kilometres away. That was my first job. I spent my savings on buying the necessary tools for a workshop. I did not even have a hammer at home. I

worked 15 hours a day so I could earn sufficient money. I also helped my father as much as I could after he was forced to work his farm again before it was expropriated.

In the meantime, the local collective farm established workshops in our barn. We were urged to join the collective since we were still being allowed to live at home. When my father went into exile, I gave up my job, and I started to work in our barn shop for the collective. Katja also joined the collective milking cows and making butter. During harvest, I worked on the fields with my reaping machine since I was skilled in its use. Every day they made us understand that we needed to leave the collective from if we didn't want to run the risk of being banned from it like our father had been. But it took time to gather the means to emigrate. My brother Gerhard invited us to the Caucasus and was able to assist us in our job search. He worked as a teacher at an excellent school, and enjoyed a fine reputation. We planned to accept his offer, and had to secretly prepare our travel, otherwise, they would have prevented us from moving. At the end of August, after the harvest season was half over, we were ready.

[216] One Sunday, my friend Gerhard Isaak took us to the train station. The train stopped, and we said goodbye, and embarked on the train. We waved to our peaceful home village, Nordheim, through the carriage window. Nordheim was not far away from the railway, so we saw its lines of houses for the last time. The wind blew through the high trees. It seemed that they would have waved at us and said, "Have a good trip! Be happy!" Nordheim had been our home. I had been born there; my cradle stood there; I had spent my childhood and youth there. This small village had been a safe harbour for the girl with the bright, curly hair, and the long thick braid. I never ceased to love this girl that I had first seen in that place. In Nordheim, we found each other, and together had experienced much joy. However, we also experienced the biggest sorrow a young couple could go through. Nonetheless, we had promised to love and to be loyal to each other. In Nordheim we had married. We had become man and wife by saying yes to the question of whether we would stay together until death. Until then, the entire story of our life had taken place in that village. But now it had become dangerous for us to stay. We had only had the chance to begin our own household there. Now we had to dismantle our home before we could finish it. We would never again settle in Nordheim. Farewell, my native village; I had to escape! The train whistled, and I looked back for the last time. I shed some tears that I never thought I'd shed. Nordheim disappeared from our vision forever.

We immediately had new sorrows. How would Karlsfeld receive us? Karlsfeld was the name of the village to which we were moving. Without difficulties, we arrived at the Mineralnye Vody¹ in the Caucasus, where we stopped at the train station of Karamyk. From there, we had to take a wagon 60 kilometres into the steppe since there were no automobiles there. We had been married for 16 months, and were expecting our first child in one and a half or two months, so we thought the rough travel might put Katja's well-being at risk. We also couldn't expect to get a wagon with springs. Under these circumstances, our bedding was the only thing to help cushion the rough ride. After five hours across the steppe and fields on very dusty roads, we arrived at Karlsfeld². We met

¹ 44°13'N 43°08'E

² In 2021 Zelenaya Roshcha, Stavropol Krai, Russia, in 2021

my brother Gerhard and Maria, his wife, and two-month-old baby in good health. They gave us a warm welcome. Our travel was over, and Katja had not suffered any harm, thank God!

Shortly after our arrival, I started looking for a job. I was lucky. I was offered work in construction at a new building site close to the village. I wouldn't earn much money, but I would receive ration stamps for two persons. Apart from this, I was promised additional food, especially vegetables. I decided to take the job. Brother Gerhard's landlords offered us a room that was 15 m². Additionally, they allowed me to use their summer kitchen as a workshop. That's how our new life in this foreign region began. While we only had a meagre income, every day we did get freshly baked black bread with our ration stamps. I was working all day, but we had enough to survive.

[217] In September 1931, my sister Tina wrote that she intended to change her job, and move to the Caucasus. That was a surprise. We had nothing against our sister coming to the Caucasus, but this meant that our parents needed to move to us too. When Tina travelled to Karlsfeld, she only visited us, and continued her journey. She decided not to live with us in the steppe. Instead, she moved to Vladikavkaz¹, a city that she thought was very beautiful.

At that time, I was immersed in my work. During October and November, Katja gave birth, and her parents would visit. Winter would then begin. In Karlsfeld, I already was getting a reputation, and my work was in demand because people recognized my skill.

I received private orders that brought more income. My son would soon be born. It happened on 8 November. He was a strong boy. We called him Reinhard. He did not care that it had been raining, and muddy on the day of this birth. We had to use our own wagon to pick up the midwife who lived in a village 15 kilometres away. Thank God that a doctor from the neighbouring village was willing to accompany me! Everything went well. Now we had to put an iron stove in our room. Our hope to get a more comfortable room was in vain. One night, I made a nice stove out of sheet iron that we could fuel with waste wood from my work. Then our room was warm again, and everything seemed to go smoothly. The weather improved, and my parents arrived at the beginning of December. The situation became more critical. There was no hope to rent a bigger apartment, so we had to make the best of it, and somehow it worked out for the short time.

I received a letter from my home region informing me to report for military service. That would be expensive, yet I also saw its positive side. During my absence, my family would have more to eat. I did not have much time to contemplate as I soon was on my way back to my home village. At the time of her visit, my sister Tina had told me that there had been rumours in Nordheim. People believed that I might have been involved in the robbery of items from the workshop while I worked for the collective. They thought that had been the reason I ran away from Nordheim. I was glad that I now had the opportunity to return to set the record straight. I knew who had spread this rumour, a man with whom I had

¹ Almost straight south from Karlsfeld in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.
43°02'24"N 44°40'39"E

worked in that workshop. I did not intend to take revenge. I just wanted to exonerate myself. I had time during my travel to think about how I could realize this. My only objective was to get back to my family as soon as possible. First, I had to get off the train.

I immediately went to say hello to my parents-in-law and told them the main events that had happened to us. Then I went straight to the workshop. All of the men were excited to greet me apart from my “friend.” He wasn’t there. They told me about what had happened during my absence, to comfort and warn me. I was ordered to come to the collective office located in our former large sitting room. A military officer welcomed me. [218] We briefly discussed the incident in the workshop, and how the theft might have been related to my sudden departure. The officer told me that it was necessary to take me to the district administration to clarify the incident. I agreed. Upon my arrival at the military office, they arrested me, and put me in a cell. On the next day, they interrogated me in detail. I sensed that the officer saw that the charge against me was absurd. Nonetheless, they did not let me go. I had to spend a second night in the cell with two other “criminals” like me. On the third morning, they interrogated me again. I had an intimate conversation with the officers explaining that I had mainly decided to leave Nordheim because I did not want to continue dealing with mean and jealous individuals who often made plots against me, as illustrated by my current situation. They had also met my “friend,” and asked me whether I would like to denounce him for slander. I answered firmly that I did not want to do this. I hoped never to see this man again in my life.

The officers allowed me to leave, and helped me to get through the mustering process as quickly as possible. I would not have to serve in the military because I had poor vision in my left eye since childhood. It was a five- or six-kilometre walk back to Nordheim. I walked across fields and meadows that used to make me feel at home. But now I just felt alienated after my family had experienced so much sorrow, grief, despotism and defamation. It was a wonderful day, and I did not hurry.

I realized that I was walking along the same route that my father had taken for the last time to escape deportation. Immersed in my own thoughts, I compared my father’s walk with my own. Smart neighbours had slandered my father. They were not Christians, however, they were still his good friends. My antagonist had also pretended to be very religious, a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Yet, he was an idiot! (I apologize for this expression.) My father had walked away while there had been a storm, frost, and snow. By contrast, I took the reverse direction while it was now sunny and warm. My father had left the village to go into the wide world, while I was returning back to Nordheim. Had my father been wrong in not defending himself against the charges of his enemies? I wasn’t sure. However, I decided to go and greet my “friend” when I was back in the village. I had these, and many other thoughts while I walked.

I returned through the gardens until I arrived at the home of my parents-in-law. At first, I wanted to tell them what had happened since I was sure that they had spent two sleepless nights. But I also had to wash, tidy up, and eat something. After the meal, I returned to the workshop, where my former colleagues again excitedly welcomed me. During this time, people who were arrested often did not return, even though they were innocent. This time my “friend” couldn’t avoid me. I gave him my hand, as I did all the other men.

[219] People wondered how I had been able to shake hands with the man who had caused many inconveniences and troubles for me. I could only reply that when he had looked at me with his sad face, I pitied him. I thought that I had done the best I could have done. He regretted what he had done to me. He had to learn to cope with his remorse for he had made trouble his entire life. Later on, he suffered much; in the wake of the Great Terror, he lost his life. People said that he had died in prison. God have mercy on his soul!

Those were warm days. I took the opportunity to send some boxes with the best potatoes back home to the Caucasus. In the Caucasian steppe, where we had settled down, potatoes were always scarce because the climate was too arid. I spent a couple of days at home. Yet, I felt I was now only a visitor.

I cheerfully travelled back to my family. Without doubt, I had established my reputation back home again. Later on, I again returned to Nordheim. Peace had won! Everyone at our house felt relieved at my return, including nice thick Hardi, as we used to call him. My potatoes arrived without damage. They really added to our diet that consisted largely of bread.

I now stepped up the pace of my work. I worked hard all day, and received numerous private orders. The variety of jobs involving different activities, and degrees of effort helped my perseverance. My hard work was widely and highly appreciated. I do not intend to conceal the fact that my brother Gerhard's reputation as a teacher, made it easier for me to thrive in my new surroundings. When my parents learned of my good start, they quit being so anxious.

Nonetheless, our economic situation remained difficult with the need of spending so much on food. I had to work a lot to afford only one or two kilograms of grain, milk, or other products. Fortunately, my wife began to find seamstress jobs. She had to go to her customers' houses because our apartment was too small. My mother, who was a knowledgeable caregiver stayed home to look after the children. Things became increasingly more difficult until the spring because of food shortages. The collective farmers even ran out of food since they had to give the harvested grain to the state. They were required to fulfill more and more requests. State officials began to hunt for food at farmers' homes, even at night. Although I was a strong and healthy man, I sometimes had no energy with my hard work and meagre diet. I sometimes thought my peers had anticipated our future when they had sung the Song About Tears at our wedding. This song surely applied to our current situation.

And if the man gives up all his hope
[220] The women will still look trustfully at
The bright sky and the infinite light of the sun
And one tear will say, Don't give up!

My beloved wife, who two or three years ago had been the girl with bright, curly hair, and long thick braid, was my good comforter. She often came to my summer kitchen at two or three in the morning speaking the last words of this verse silently to me. She sometimes added, "Remember how we had to eat our dog in 1921." I would become

content again. My brother also frequently visited while I stood at the workbench. As a passionate singer, he said to me,

My dear brother, if you lose your hope, you won't accomplish anything
So, you need to immediately start singing cheerfully
Then your heart will regain what is missing
As the fields need dew, so the soul needs song.

I never contradicted him. I knew he had good intentions, doing the best he could, and could do no more. His very benevolent wife was a gifted pianist. She was from a well-off family but had lost her family ties when they became impoverished. Beforehand, her father had had a good job. Having made good money, his children got a lot, much more than they had needed. They now lacked what they used to have. By contrast, many things that were now needed, their parents had not imparted to their children, thinking them not necessary, things they were now unable to acquire. There were reasons to pity our brother, but he was always cheerful when he sang. Without doubt, a suitable song can brighten the mood of unhappy people so that they can regain their strength. That is the strong power of song. Everyone who has experienced the influence of singing can testify to its strength, but people who have not experienced this have missed a lot. My dear brother, I agree with you. Singing beautifies life; singing cheers up the heart. God gave us song to mitigate sorrow and pain. However, I mumbled to myself so that Gerhard could hear, "In my case, a thick slice of bread would go a long way to cheer me up."

I pitied my parents the most. My mother had a small body so that she was also fine with a small diet. By contrast, my father had a large, strong body so he soon began to suffer. Then I made an odd discovery. My father always loved to leisurely wander in nature. Later, he would share his observations with us. We all enjoyed his hobby, and he pursued it in his new surroundings. Now, though, I noticed that he used to sit in silence for hours without talking to anyone. He visited me less frequently in my workshop. Before he had always been interested in seeing how I was trying out new work methods. He also knew a lot about woodworking. But now he sat alone in solitude for hours, and appeared to be absent-minded. I became worried and nervous. Katja couldn't explain it either.

One day, my mother came into my workshop. I immediately knew she wanted to share something that was worrying her. She hesitated, so I asked whether she intended to tell me what was going on with my father. She replied, "That is exactly the reason why I am here." She told me father had said that everyone had to do what he could to help us get out of this miserable situation. [321] He told her, "I want to support David since I am knowledgeable about the work he is doing. But I think I would just bother him after having watched him for a while. Once we had already had problems when we decided to work together. Back then, David did not like it when someone visited while he was working. David did not want to be interrupted or distracted when he was solving a problem. A craftsman is always busy making his process better. He is always keen to make a change that will improve efficiency. A craftsman has to worry about bettering his techniques all the time in order to increase his income. David needs to do this. I did the same, but I cannot keep up with David. He uses different methods—thing I don't know. He works so diligently that I would only hinder

him. But if he continues to work so much, he will have a breakdown. Do you remember when that happened to me?" Father continued, "David told me that I should go for walks because I am unable to help him. You know how much you can learn from nature. It occurred to me that I spend a lot of energy on my walks in the fresh air. Unfortunately, we do not have much food. Where would David get more food? The situation will change at some point. It will improve. But for now, I think the best thing I can do is save my energy. I can keep busy simply by sitting calmly and talking to you." This was father's conclusion.

Mother told me, "You will see, David. I'll come up with an idea. Don't you work yourself to death! Remember, you have a wonderful son who will need you later." Mother repeated her favourite proverb she always used when the situation appeared to be difficult and intolerable, "Winter can menace us with threatening gestures as much as he wants. He can spread ice and frost. Nevertheless, spring will always come."

I leaned against the workbench, standing, and listened to my mother. She came very close, took my hands, and spoke, "Come, my dear boy. I want to give you a kiss. It is a long time since I have." Then she left, more precisely, she limped out of the room. Mother always walked with a walking stick because she had to be careful with her crooked legs. Sometimes she did jump up, leaving the stick aside, when she had a good idea. But she'd be limping badly. Nonetheless, it showed us that she was eager to put her words into action. On these occasions, we were supposed to listen carefully to her. Now she had left. I stood still for a while as if I was under a spell. I thought about my father's situation. I then took up my tenon saw. At this moment, I wasn't thinking about making my procedures more efficient, but I did think about how I could help my father. [222] I would have enjoyed spending an hour each day in nature with him. However, it was clear that my father would have refused this offer. An idea came to me. Yes, that would solve the problem.

That evening, I visited my brother while prepared the next day's lesson. I asked him whether I would be allowed to look through his books for a bit. Obviously, he didn't say no, he had nothing against it. I knew what book I wanted. There was a book about the historical costumes and traditions of the central Asian mountain tribes, and their history. My father was interested in this book. I took the book to my workshop, skimmed the book, and found it appropriate for my father. At breakfast the next day, I asked father whether he was interested in the life and history of central Asian tribes. I was confident that he would agree—I knew my father too well. So, I put forward a proposal, "Right now, I have other things to do than to read. Father, you didn't have much time to read when you started to establish your family. But you now have lots of time to read. Read this book, and you can tell me about it for an hour. Wouldn't we both benefit from that?" Father asked, "Then would you sit down and listen to me?" I answered, "I will not only listen. We can discuss the book. Katja and mother can listen to our discussion."

From that time on, I regularly took an hour in the evening before it was dark while the dinner was being prepared on the small iron stove. We enjoyed a nice hour of conversation. Father told about the book. I fueled the oven with wood shavings. Meantime, mother was taking care of her grandson, and Katja was preparing dinner. We sometimes went to Gerhard's, and engaged him in our discussions. In addition, my father had food for the mind, even though it could not replace his meagre diet. We were all happy. My mother

took up her needlework again. She knotted hairnets for women—filet knitting is the proper term. It appeared to be a trifle, but there was an extraordinary demand for hairnets. My mother was able to make hairnets in different colours and shapes. She was aware of her skill, so she had brought yarn from Nordheim to keep a store of it. Despite the general shortage of food, women and girls sometimes saved a litre of milk, pound of butter, some eggs, or jar of porridge to exchange for fashionable clothing. The more food we had, the more nutritious our meals became. We prepared ourselves for spring with this production. Also, Katja began to support my mother. I had got a bicycle for a job I had done, and although it needed to be completely repaired, that was easy for me.

In our area, spring was beginning. At the same time, changes took place in our home and family. That repaired, reliable bicycle played a crucial role. As usual, farmers could sell more butter and sour cream on the market because the gradually greening meadow allowed the cows to give more milk. The chickens were laying more eggs too. Furthermore, various sorts of grasses, blossoms, and later berries began to grow. Our house, kitchen, storage and diet changed dramatically since my bicycle allowed me to get to more remote villages. [223] I could trade with currency, or with my mother's hairnets. Now we had enough to eat again.

With the beginning of spring, new people arrived in our village, and others wanted to leave, or had no choice other than to leave. Apartments became available. The Roth family offered us a big room that extended over the entire house. With a curtain we delimited a comfortable sleeping niche for my parents. I had already made them a bed. Our family now enjoyed more humane living conditions. We had enough food, and could take time for adequate rest. We felt that we had succeeded in overcoming the crisis.

The spring also caused some movement in our house. My wife was missing her parents and siblings. Her brother, Heinrich, my best friend, had married. We had our first baby. It is not surprising that a young mother, the only daughter in her family, wanted to show her first-born to her family. It wasn't surprising at all. And then right away we had such a terrible winter! My mother, too, wanted to visit her own mother and my siblings, Liese, Elvira, and Peter, and all her grandchildren. My grandmother was living at my sister Liese's home. However, my mother did not take any initiative to travel together with Katja. We did not have money, and she was too afraid to ask me to pay. My parents watched how Katja was getting ready for her trip. I asked my mother whether she wanted to join Katja. She declined this offer, "No, I have to stay with you. It won't work. We should also remember that—" I interrupted her, "—that it is expensive to travel? Mother, don't forget that you can travel with your own money if you do not want to ask me. You think it would be too much to ask me for money. But you have enough money to travel. Here. See, that is how much you have. You earned it." I had written down how much money I had made from the hairnets she had given to me to sell in the village. It was a sufficient sum to afford the travel. My mother looked at my father as if she expected him to answer for her. Obviously, she wanted him to answer in the affirmative. My father only said, "I can take care of preparing meals." I said, "Mother, did you hear that? Now, go and get ready! We need to be at the train station tomorrow night." The ride to the train station would stop at the school where my brother Gerhard worked. My mother now began to limp around

without her stick. My father spoke severely to her. “You need to calm down. Take your stick! Otherwise, what happened to you in youth will happen again!”

My mother, Katja and our child travelled back to our home village. Father and I did everything on our own. Throughout the entire spring to late fall, we bought various sorts of vegetables from the experimental fields. We didn’t have to pay much because I was still working at the new construction site. Additionally, I was eligible to get wood for my personal work. In the meantime, the teaching staff of Karlfeld’s school became aware of our presence, but we hadn’t had the opportunity to get to know one another so far. Considering that our new room was close to the school, we gradually became better acquainted with each other. The school hired a new headmaster who was keen to apply the newly-introduced system of polytechnical education at his school. I caught his attention, and I was offered the job of creating the school’s workshop. It had to be ready by the beginning of the new school year (1 September). I accepted this job because it provided me with some additional income. As a result, I had two jobs. I had to work at the construction site, and the school. Since my father and I were living alone I didn’t worry much about housework – my father took care of that. Father was able to walk longer distances so he could get to many places including the experimental field, where he could buy vegetables. He was happier again because he was busy. I worked for two months from mid-June to mid-August, and I handed the newly-outfitted workshop over to the school. The school also ran a small farm that shared some of its produce with me. Father and I even stored away some food. My mother and Katja with our little son would return home in two weeks. So, after I had finished my work for the school, I had time to do some work at home. I produced new pieces of furniture, and some containers where we could store pickled vegetables. Father and I were able to get things ready for winter. However, that evening an event happened that twisted my entire life and perspective.

As already indicated, the new headmaster, whose name was Falk, was an exuberant man who wanted his school to achieve new levels, and he was capable. My energetic working methods, and my quick adaptability must have made a good impression on him. He admitted this to me later. But now, he intended to convince me to work for the school. Without my knowledge he had asked the village administration for a new apartment that he could offer to a new teacher and family. One day, he invited me to meet him at the school, and offered me a position as a polytechnic teacher. I would not get many hours for this subject, and my salary would not be that high. So, he also wanted me to teach practical farming. The schools had agricultural resources: 20 hectares of land, four horses, two cows, some pigs, and about 50-70 chickens. The farm revenue would be used to compensate me for the second part of my duties. My compensation would consist partially, or entirely of agricultural products. Apart from this, I would obtain, like all the other teachers, free lodging, heating fuels, and lighting. I would have all the privileges that teachers enjoy. I could move onto a farmstead in the village, with four rooms, a kitchen, a hall, a veranda, a yard with a fruit garden, a plot where you could grow vegetables, an annex where you could keep chickens, pigs, and so forth. The headmaster’s offer could not have been better. I always had to think about the pedagogic aspect. According to an education plan, I had to work with the students in the workshops, barns, and farmstead. I needed to prepare instructions to guide and supervise students.

[225] I immediately recognized the implications of the headmaster's offer. There would be many difficulties that would have both a negative and positive side. I had to think through these before making a decision. This year the experimental field would be dissolved upon the completion of its project. Then I would need to find a new job, and thus, would probably have to move to another place. Working for the school, however, would provide me with a secure job and accommodation for some time. In some ways it would have been easier for me to continue to be a woodworker and metalworker due to my professional experiences. By contrast, being a polytechnical teacher, and in charge of the school's farm would require taking an educational approach towards my coworkers, and running the agricultural process in an instructional manner. Considering that the students had to run the school's farm, the second duty was also pedagogically demanding. However, I would earn a decent income. I could never obtain housing better than was offered by the school. I preferred the living environment of a German village over moving to a random place where non-Germans lived. I had to choose between joining a collective of workers, or becoming one of the teachers. Serving as a teacher would provide me many more opportunities to advance my theoretical education than working on a construction site. Taking these reflections into account, it was obvious that being a teacher had more advantages than seeking employment in construction. Nevertheless, I struggled to convince myself to become a teacher. From my childhood onwards, I had been enthusiastic about practical work. I enjoyed being mindful about my work, and supporting my work through creativity. I was not sure whether it fit my interests to help children to develop their mental capacities. Furthermore, I had no training in education. My motto was: Whatever you do, you need to do it wholeheartedly. My parents, elder siblings, and teachers had encouraged me to consider my own intellectual development when deciding on something in addition to its potential benefits. Consequently, I asked the generous headmaster to wait for three days for my decisions. On Saturday, I would pick up my mother and grandmother from the train station. The next day, I would discuss the job offer with my family, including my brother Gerhard. On Monday, I would tell the headmaster my decision.

My brother Gerhard promised to support me. After coming to a final answer, I told the headmaster that I would start to work at the school from 1 September onwards. That would be in five or six days.

My former colleagues completely understood why I wanted to change, and without much bureaucracy, they allowed me to leave the collective with a promise to help me out whenever I needed resources. My family and I were happy.

[226] Experienced people say that every beginning is difficult, and this also applied to me. My main difficulty was overcoming my uncertainty. That took some time, but then I enjoyed showing children things they hadn't seen before, and giving them information that they hadn't known. I also explained things they had admired but never understood. This is how I gained my own confidence that I could teach. My students believed that they could learn something useful from me.

After working for one year as a teacher, I was happy to see that everything had gone well. Both the children, and the school administration appreciated my work. I had found out how much specialized knowledge teachers needed in order to satisfy children's

curiosity. I also noticed how much children enjoyed a teacher who could convincingly answer all their questions. At the end of the school year, I felt confident that the children liked me as much as I liked them. I once heard a teacher, whom I could now call a colleague, say, “A teacher ceases to be a teacher when they stop learning.” I changed this sentence to fit my own purposes: I still need to learn a lot to become a real teacher. And I’d need to continue learning to stay competent. That corresponded with my life’s goal, and now was the time to further my own learning.

We had lived for one winter in the house that the village administration had given me because of my employment as a teacher. Father and mother had their very own comfortable room. Moreover, we had a living room, a bedroom, and I had established my workshop in one room. Our accommodations could not have been better. Father was kept busy with the yard and garden. We had purchased pigs and chickens. Katja, my parents, and I were only sad about the fact that my brother Gerhard started to work at the pedagogic institute in distant Vladikavkaz, and had moved away from Karlsfeld. We all knew that it would be difficult for him to succeed economically. My sister Tina lived there in an apartment close to where she worked at the hospital. But Tina and Gerhard were not close. I received holiday pay since I had to take care of the school’s farm while the other teachers were on holidays. I made a list of all villages in our school district, and each week, one group of students came to do agricultural work on the school’s farm. This is the way we ran the farm during summer. At the same time, we were able to improve our housing and rearrange things. From the orchard we harvested many apples, cherries, apricots, and mulberries. We were able to eat and preserve as much fruit as we wanted. Likewise, the garden was full of vegetables. Our economic conditions were excellent. All our family members were in good spirits.

[227] The summer went by, and autumn began. One day, headmaster Falk disappeared. I wondered where he had gone, and why he had to leave. Everything kept running well at the school. We got a new headmaster named Jakob Abraham Toews. Our families were not related though. We soon got to know each other. He was very interested in agriculture, more than the former headmaster, and I hoped that would make things easier for me. The new headmaster told us that Falk had run away. Some people in the administration opposed him because he had belonged to a wealthy family, so his situation had not been secure. He was often forced to change his position. I could sympathize with Falk because my father had been in that same situation.

The government was issuing passports to all Soviet citizens for the first time since the revolution now that it had achieved a secure position. The new headmaster informed me about the introduction of passports, but we had not yet read about the government’s plans in the newspaper. The Soviets knew that many people from former prosperous families had hidden by leaving their homes, and immigrated to places where no one knew their social background. Through issuing passports, the Soviets wanted to expose all these “criminal elements,” really only refugees. After they were found, the Soviets forced them to join new groups of deportees. To obtain a passport, a citizen had to show a certificate verifying their social background issued by their home village administrator. This is how the Soviets found refugees. All state officials were given instructions about how these certificates had to be written so that they could find the previous social group of any citizen. This

development threatened us. The certificate that my father could expect would state he was a kulak¹ and had run away after expropriation. Consequently, my certificate would indicate that I was the son of an expropriated kulak. After having struggled to overcome the first difficulties, we now had to deal with a much more threatening situation. We had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.

What could we do about it? Should we run away like Falk had? If so, where should we go? It would have been easier if we were on our own but my parents lived with us. Moreover, if I told my parents about it, they would be struck by a sadness that could have turned out to be deadly. I spent one sleepless night after another. Nonetheless, I did not show my family that I was upset; I said nothing about it.

The harvest hands arrived at the school to harvest grain that could feed the livestock during winter. The school year began, and there was a lot to do. We had planted beautiful sugarcanes on the school's field. It looked perfect! We needed to cut the sugarcanes, separate the seeds, then clean the stems, and bring everything to the farmyard. There I had already prepared a press, and I had placed three stoves with cooking pans next to them. We now had to press the sugarcane to obtain sugar juice, and boil down to syrup. I asked my wife to help us boil the juice properly since she knew how to do it. It was quite an activity.

[228] During one sleepless night, I thought about how we could avoid the threat, and what we could do if the misfortune befell us. I considered a possibility that might be our last chance. I pondered about all the necessary words. I also needed to write a short and precise address. As usual, I got up in the morning, and while Katja was preparing breakfast, I wrote the following letter.

Good day, my dear colleague, Abraham.

I am sure that you are safe, and doing well. I hope that you will continue to enjoy a safe and happy life with your family in the future. As far as I know, you will soon have begun your own family.

I now turn to the reason why I am writing to you. My dear friend, we both know that our government will implement a new passport system. In fact, you might even know it better than I do. Likewise, we are both aware of why the government introduced the new system, and what these policies aim to achieve. You also know better than me what sort of certificate all Soviet citizens need to obtain to apply for a passport. Likewise, we both know, if, perchance, you do not know better than I do, what will happen to citizens whose applications would be rejected.

You see, I am worried about my family's well-being, especially about my father and myself. Abraham, you are the only one who can save us, or you can destroy us. I have asked you for nothing that would pose a threat to you. I just ask you to do what you can do. Please, follow your convictions and your conscience.

My address is...

Yours, ...

¹ *Written in the margin:* The large farmers were known as *kulaks*. The Soviets ordered their expropriation and deportation.

Prior to Abraham Unruh leaving to finish school in Ebental, we had attended the same school. He always had been a mediocre student. I often was able to help him, but at one point I had fallen behind (written about previously). He was a member of the Communist Party, and had presided over the village council in my home village. There was no possibility that I could avoid him. I was aware that my friend would probably take the risk if he could use a little cunning to formulate our certificates to our benefit.

I now waited for his reply. Two weeks later it came. Soon after, the newspaper reported that the Soviet Union would formally introduce a passport system for the first time. They also mentioned the requirements you needed to meet to obtain a passport. The predictions of my headmaster proved to be accurate. After examining the newspaper carefully, my father was silent for a while. He then asked me what we had to do, and what to anticipate. I answered him that we had to wait. My reply alarmed him, though he did not say anything.

About a month later, I was told I had to get documents to apply for a passport. I promptly did everything that I needed to do. One day, I handed passports to my father, mother, and wife. They were happy to look at these small gray-green booklets on which our life entirely depended. Our anxiety was over. From then on, we were regular Soviet citizens. How far away from us was the next purge?

In the meantime, the school kept moving. Everything went as it had been expected. We had a good harvest. We had filled 50 containers of syrup. In addition, we had slaughtered some pigs. The food supplies also supported our boarding school, and students had enough to eat.

[229] The next schoolyear 1934-1935 turned out to be beneficial for all students and teachers, and a success for me. I was the polytechnical teacher of the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. In addition, I taught the elementary subjects to the second grade. The year before, I had prepared myself well for these new duties so I could successfully and confidently work with my students. I enjoyed teaching the children in the second grade very much. In my second year as a teacher, I already noted that I was good at my job even though I had been quite sure about it before. I gradually began to like being a teacher. That motivated me. I also increasingly became convinced that I could continue my own education while I taught. I decided that I would take a correspondence course the next year. However, this plan would not work out.

In Vladikavkaz, Gerhard was having a tough life, and my sister Tina's marriage with a military officer was short lived. Three days after their wedding ceremony, her husband had "abandoned" her. While making inspections in the mountains, her husband was killed by enemies. After long investigations, Tina was told to leave the city for security reasons. As a result, she returned to the hospital where she had previously worked, where she got a nice apartment. Then she asked my parents to return to her. After reading her letter, my parents were not sure whether they should accept her proposal to move back. They would wait at least until spring because they really enjoyed living with us. Apart from this, they thought Tina needed time to figure out whether she would want to marry again. In their opinion,

she had not acted responsibly in the last couple of years. Time went on. We thought that peace had finally arrived. Were we right?

The next spring, animosity between previously peaceful people became increasingly evident during sowing time. The immorality had begun in 1930-1931 when some proletarians from the Volga region moved to our village. These were German people, but their language and behaviour were depraved. They were discontent, aggressive, lazy, and dishonest people. They invited more members of their group to migrate to the village, and so consolidated their position against the old villagers. The conflict became sharper. It looked more and more like a class war. There were rumours that members of the Communist Party were inciting this conflict. Those claims turned out to be accurate. Under the current circumstances in Russia, it was clear that the pro-proletarian party would eventually succeed.

Over time, the conflict became so aggressive that the local administration even admitted that they considered relocating the entire old village population at one time to resolve the fight. The repercussions of this decision for the teachers, students, and my parents were obvious. [230] After they had arrested my oldest female colleague, who had the misfortune to have Hindenburg¹ as a surname, we knew that it could be dangerous to stay in the village. My parents now decided to move to live with sister Tina. I wrote to my brother Gerhard to report the developing situation in Karlsfeld. In May, he replied that he had found a job at a school in the German village of Michelsdorf near Vladikavkaz. They were willing to hire me, too, so I should come to him immediately before getting myself arrested. He also supported my parent's decision. Jakob Toews, our headmaster, advised me to accept my brother's invitation to avoid bigger troubles. He promised to help me prepare to leave Karlsfeld in the middle of June. Later, he gave up his own position and move to be with his father who also worked as a teacher, and had invited his son to work at his school. This is how all our optimistic plans proved to be futile. Oh God, when would we be able to find a place of tranquility in this evil world?

After we had finished spring sowing at the school's farm, my parents travelled to Tina's place. We had not told them much about our plan to move to the area of Vladikavkaz. We did not want to make them worry about us. Nonetheless, we prepared ourselves for making good on this plan. Immediately after my parent's move-out, another family moved to their former room. It was a married couple with two children. We had been friends for a longer period of time and had shared the farmstead with them. They were jovial people who lost their own big farmstead, and impressive red brick house to the collective farm. It had been the most beautiful farm in the entire village. The man now worked as secretary to the village council. He was very knowledgeable about all sorts of policies so he enjoyed a good reputation among the villagers, and the administration. In theory, he had voluntarily given up his farm. Nevertheless, he thought about how to help the inhabitants of his former farm in case that they had to move out. After this, he also wanted also to flee. A long time later, we learned that he had carried out his plan, and worked as a German teacher in a Russian school in some city.

¹ Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) general in WWI and later President of Germany after naming Hitler as chancellor.

At the end of the 19th century, his father had belonged to the delegation that travelled to St. Petersburg to ask Nikolai II. for some land to found a settlement. The Czar was friendly and gave them their wish. Czar Nikolai ordered the sale to them of about 300 hectares of land or dessiatins (that was the measure they used back then) in the North Caucasus for a low price. In this region, they had founded two villages. One of the villages was named Romanovka to pay tribute to Russia's imperial family. They called the other one Olgino, after the name of the Czar's oldest daughter Olga. After the revolution, Romanovka was renamed Karlsfeld, while Olgino kept its name. Droughts had frequently affected the sandy steppe land where nomads had pastured their sheep. However, the Mennonite settlers had turned the steppe into rich wheat fields. That had not been an easy task. The groundwater was at a depth of 15-20 metres. [231] It tasted so bitter that no human could drink it. However, the livestock got used to the water because they drank it from birth. They could also use it for brewing. From early on, the settlers had been eager to build homes as fast as possible. Without exception, they had covered the roofs with glazed tiles. This was so they could capture all the rainwater. Every house had a cemented rainwater cistern attached to it. Often when it hadn't rained for a while, cistern water would stink. Nonetheless, the settlers needed to drink it. Apart from this, the villages had become a thriving colony whose inhabitants maintained direct contact with Germany even after the revolution. The villagers were very honest people. They spoke in a melodious low-German at home with their families. However, if they met in public or talked to non-locals (teachers, pastors, and so forth), they would shift to a pure formal German. Turning to their agriculture, they mainly harvested spring wheat, but didn't harvest many vegetables. However, all farms cultivated grape vines very successfully. This is the way both villages became wealthy. They were two or three kilometres away from each other. In 1923, Hans Neufeld, our brother-in-law, Maria's husband, had accepted a position in Karlsfeld-Romanovka. In 1925, my brother Gerhard moved to Romanovka where he married. In 1932/1933, he moved to Vladikavkaz. As already mentioned, Katja and I had moved to Karlsfeld in autumn 1931, and we now had to leave the area. We had had many tough experiences there! It is hard to imagine how hard I had worked during that time. We had not starved, but we had not had enough to eat each day for a whole year. Our first son had been born in Karlsfeld. Then our living condition had suddenly improved. Within the year, we had become well off. I had moved up the social ladder from a working man to a teacher. At that point, I could have continued my education, but the opportunity had passed. Now I had to do everything possible just to save my life.

In August 1933, under these circumstances, we moved to Michelsdorf¹, where my brother Gerhard lived. The village was in the area of Vladikavkaz. The city went through a number of name changes². It was named Ordzhonikidze to remember the outstanding Caucasian revolutionary Ordzhonikidze, who Stalin executed. After this, the city was called Dzauzhikau.

¹ On the north outskirts of Vladikavkaz on the right bank of the River Terek. Mikhaylovskoye, North Ossetia–Alania Republic, Russia in 2021.

² From 1931 to 1944 and from 1954 to 1990, Vladikavkaz's name in Russian was *Ordzhonikidze* (Орджоникидзе), and from 1944 to 1954 it was officially called *Dzauzhikau* (Дзауджикау). Vladikavkaz resumed its old Russian name, in 1990.

What could we expect from Michelsdorf? The village was excellently structured. It had four streets. The first one led along the river Terek. The second was located above the first street but parallel to it, while the third was above the second street. The fourth and highest one was parallel to the rail line. The train station that was named Kollonka was situated across from the village. The rail line connected Beslan with Vladikavkaz. The village was ten kilometres away from Beslan and three from Vladikavkaz. The population consisted of degenerate Germans¹, backward people who spoke a dialect that was difficult to understand. Half of the population was illiterate; the other was hardly able to read or write. [232] The villagers were farmers who now worked for the collective farm. They cultivated oats and millet, but they mainly grew corn and potatoes. From spring into June, they barely had a day without rain. These days were a mix of rain and sunshine. The rest of the year was more stable. August, September, and October were sunny, and rarely rainy. Yet, it never became hot. It is not difficult to see that this climate was perfect for potatoes as if the area had been created for potato farming. I had never heard about or experienced such favourable conditions for potatoes with a harvest of 300 *zentners*² per hectare. In addition, they benefited from the train station next to the village. Every 30 minutes, a fully loaded train arrived. Every day, women and girls would stand with flower bouquets opposite the train to make some extra money. The people's backwardness was puzzling. The elementary school, with seven grades, was located in a beautiful, newly-built brick building. The first through fourth grades were taught in three simple buildings. In this school, headed by a man by the name of Dubs, brother Gerhard took the post of tutor. They had a grade two class for me. This is what brother Gerhard told me.

What did we actually experience in Michelsdorf? Upon our arrival at my brother and his wife Maria's home, they served us potatoes and pumpkin. We did not get meat or fat. They did not have bread. They only had poured some milk into the mashed potatoes. Anyways, they could not offer us anything else.

Housing wasn't part of the school's obligation. I had to find something on my own, no matter how high the rent might be. In a few days, I found an apartment, a small room with windows you couldn't open, with walls of stone that weren't entirely split. The room only had an earth floor. There was no source of heat. We only had four walls around a single room 5 by 4 metres. Fuel, consisting of freshly cut wood, could be delivered but you had to pay for it yourself. There was just one store where you could buy for cash some kilograms of flour, lamp oil, matches, and sometimes 500 grams of butter. That was everything Michelsdorf had to offer. I received my salary from Karlsfeld until 10 August. From 1 September onwards, I received salary from the Michelsdorf school. I had no salary for the 20 days between.

With 20 days what could I do with my free time? Firstly, I purchased a broken bicycle from a colleague. I promised him to pay for it after receiving my first pay. One or two days later, I had repaired it. Then I explored the area surrounding the village to find out how far you had to go to get to villages where you could buy things. Overall, it was cheaper to buy directly from the farm than going to a market. Katja and our landlady made the room livable

¹ The village was founded by Lutherans from the central German states in 1861.

² One *zentner* (Цѣнтер) denotes 100kg.

as far as was possible. I mounted two windows on hinges so we could let in fresh air. In a week, the walls would be dried out. In the meantime, we slept at Gerhard and Maria's house. Waste potatoes were cheap at the train station where they loaded the potatoes onto freight cars. [233] Like everywhere in Russia, the more you pay, the better the waste potatoes' quality. My wife was soon able to deal with this new situation, and was able to purchase sufficient for our meals. We bought other waste to feed our animals. Our landlady gave us a small room (2 x 2 metres) for doing our repairs, where we were also allowed to keep a goat and some geese. I was bought some sheet iron and made a stove. Now we moved to our new room. We placed the small iron stove where the wall remained damp, especially in the corners so we soon had (relatively) good indoor air. After moving in, I began to make some trips. The potato and grain harvest had not finished yet, so the members of the collective farms were not able to sell food to the market. Nonetheless, it was possible to buy some directly from the farms. On my first day trip, I didn't buy anything, but the second and third trips were successful. I purchased a goat, and eight adult geese, and I took the animals home. A short time before, the goat had given birth. I left the kid behind since we wanted to use the milk. Katja now had work to do. We fed the geese with cooked potatoes and chopped grass. The goat ate raw potatoes, and we pastured it on the riverbank for an hour or two twice daily. There was also a fertile pasture with ripe or half-ripe weeds or grass that the geese liked to eat. We boiled everything with the potatoes. We mashed them and fed the geese with it. We did not give much water to the geese, and watered the goat at the river. Katja then returned home with two buckets of water. In Michelsdorf, all the people got the water they needed from the river. The village didn't have a well. For nourishing the goat, we received creamy milk, two litres a day. It was easy feeding the geese.

With just one week left before starting my new job I still had to complete a demanding task. We had left ten sacks filled with high-quality white flour at Jakob Toews' house in Karlsfeld. I wanted to pick them up. The only automobile in the village was owned by the store. The president of the collective store was a good man. He supported the progressive forces of the village, especially the teachers. I dared to ask him for the automobile. I promised to give him and the driver one sack of flour each for their help. Apart from this, I would pay him the official price for the service. He then looked at me and asked me whether I was making fun of him. I replied, "No, I am serious about this. But we need to go there tomorrow and return home in two days." We invited the driver into our discussion. He insisted that we had to make the trip the day after next because he had to prepare the automobile.

[234] The trip went smoothly. In Karlsfeld, Jakob Toews had slaughtered some pigs for the boarding school. He gave me some pieces of meat and lard. He said that he was aware that I was experienced a challenging time. Nevertheless, I should be glad that I escaped the troubles now beginning in Karlsfeld. The administration had begun to create a list of the long-established villagers who were going to be deported. In the meantime, the Volga Germans had behaved very badly. The administration was keeping secret where they would deport these long-established hard-working villagers. I was glad not to be involved in this situation. The teachers had been ordered to organize the deportation.

Memories of His Hometown

We also were returning with two boxes of goods for the store to Michelsdorf. The next evening, we were back and I gave the promised flour. When I came to the office the next day to pay my debts, Dörr said to me, "You do not have to give me a sack of flour. We are even. We received goods for the store, and brought your items too. You don't have to pay for this." Upon this, he smiled at me whimsically. I then shook my head, but he gave me his right hand continuing, "You need to feel at home here." I invited both him and the driver to have dinner with us, and both accepted. It was easy to enjoy a vivid conversation until late while eating mashed potatoes with roast goose sauce and fresh pastry, and drinking spirits in the Russian manner. I also invited Gerhard and Maria, who left last. Before they went home, I put a sack of flour in a hand cart that they could take home. We all were happy when we left each other. Everything had gone well, and we had also made some new friends.

Now I was prepared to start my work, as much as I had been able to do in Michelsdorf. I had already familiarized myself with the textbooks, curriculum, and the school's rules. On 31 August, I had to attend an organizational meeting to receive instructions on teaching my class, and a list of my prospective students. My colleague, Friedrich Föll, and I would teach the two classes of second graders in a building with two classrooms. We both went to our classrooms to get familiar with their interior. We were happy about what we saw, and we looked forward to teaching the next day.

When I entered the classroom in the morning, 25 cheerful children stood up in front of me. They were curiously looking at their new teacher. Upon my "Good morning," they greeted me cheerfully back, "Good morning." I said, "Good morning! Sit down!" This was how the first lesson of the new school year began. I soon got used to the students, and they got used to me. The classes went quickly and harmoniously. The first of December was approaching, and the overall situation was calm. Nonetheless, you could feel something in the air. We heard about party purges, but these had frequently occurred. At that time, you could only get radio signals regularly in a few cities, Michelsdorf not being among them. Furthermore, only members of the party or officials received newspapers. Private radio sets were forbidden. As a result, no one was well informed.

[235] On 1 December, my brother Gerhard visited. We didn't see each other every day because the main school building wasn't close to the building where Friedrich Föll and I taught. I got excited about when I caught sight of him approaching the door. I greeted him, and asked him to come to my desk where I was busy preparing the lessons for the next day. Gerhard was an expert teacher, so I asked him some pedagogical questions. But then he asked me whether I had heard about the new developments in the Communist Party's Central Committee of the Soviet Union and the government. When I said no, he told me that Sergei Kirov, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, had been shot while working in his office by a man named Leonid Nikolaev. At that time, Kirov was important in Russian politics, an outstanding revolutionary, and party leader famous for his aggressive speeches. Gerhard added that this incident could lead to severe consequences. He told me that our colleague Martins had heard this on his private radio, and had shared the news with the other teachers.

I remember that Martin had previously informed us about the death of Hindenburg, the President of the Germany. That had happened on 2 August in the same year (1934). On this day, Martins and our colleague Matthis, who lived in the same house, entered the teacher's room, where Dubs and other teachers were sitting. Martin said, "We should hoist a black flag today." Dubs then asked him, "Why? Is today a day of mourning?" Martins replied, "Yes, indeed. Hindenburg died." When we heard this, everyone was quiet.

Recalling this moment, I asked my brother whether he had access to Martins' radio. He told me that he rarely listened to the radio. I was shocked, and warned him, "You should not do this. That is dangerous." On the next two days, you could read about this assassination in all newspapers.

On 4 December, the political upheaval suddenly began. Seventeen men were arrested that night, three teachers among them: Martin, Matthis, and my brother Gerhard. The other 14 were members of the church council and other "suspicious" men. That same night, Gerhard's pregnant wife, who due soon, knocked on our window bewildered. After we let her in, she told us that the KGB had searched their entire house and had taken Gerhard with them. Three or four days later, Dubs told us that he had been instructed to hire new teachers to replace the arrested men. This news showed us how serious the situation was, that it would be some time before the release of our colleagues. From the night of 3 and 4 December onwards, a lot of people began to have sleepless nights. No one knew when and who would be arrested next. We lived in a corner room across from the church. We could see every automobile that came from the city at the crossroads there. Our two windows faced this road so we could detect all these automobiles from far away. It did not matter whether they came straight or from the left, the headlamps shone through one of our windows.

[236] There is a Russian proverb: Fear has big eyes. This means that an anxious person sees dangers everywhere, and exactly described our situation. We anticipated that every automobile that drove by was coming to arrest me. We could never relax. We had put our beds together so that our two-year-old son could always lie between us. Every night could be the last night I had an opportunity to hold my son in my arms. When lying in bed, we were half-dressed to have more time with each other if the KGB came to arrest me. It was a terrible time. During work, I was not allowed to show my anxiety to my students, but I couldn't suppress my feelings at home. I sometimes declared that I had already prepared myself for arrest, but that was a lie. No one wanted to get arrested. Several times the KGB came to pick up someone. No one could feel safe whether you were in a position of power or not.

However, the KGB hadn't come yet. After Maria had given birth to twins, and regained her health, the village council informed me that the KGB would allow her and her children to visit Gerhard. We drove into the city to the KGB. We were allowed to ask and reply to questions for 15 minutes. Gerhard's trial took place three months later. Only relatives of the accused, several militiamen, and KGB officials were permitted to attend. The main accusation was that the teachers had illegally listened to the foreign radio station, and spread the news with ill intent. Taking into consideration that the three teachers were not equally opposed to the Soviet government, the judges decided the following verdicts: H.

Martins should be executed by firing squad because he came from a wealthy family, had owned the radio, and had maliciously agitated against the Soviet government. He had proven to be an enemy of the Soviet Union, and was a danger. P. Matthis was sentenced for listening to forbidden radio stations and distributing negative foreign information about the Soviet Union. But because of his weak character, he had been easily convinced to engage in activities damaging to the Soviet Union. It was decided to deport him to the North of the Soviet Union for ten years to live under strict regulations. In addition to his, he would spend five years in a re-education camp. Gerhard Toews was sentenced for listening to forbidden foreign radio programs hostile to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, he did not take measures to prevent Martins and Matthis from engaging in anti-Soviet activities, even though he had been responsible for the teaching staff. Therefore, it was decided to deport him to a regular Soviet concentration camp for seven years.

Mikhail Kalinin, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, changed Martin's sentence. Like Matthis, he was now deported for ten years. At that time, that was the highest possible sentence except for capital crimes.

All other arrested inhabitants of Michelsdorf were transferred to concentration camps in different ways on various dates. [237] The KGB had left me alone for now. Until the end of my duties, I could continue to work as a teacher without any interference together with my colleague Friedrich Föll.

Only after Stalin's death, we learned the reasons for Kirov's assassination and the wave of terror resulting from it. At that point, we just knew that there was terrorism in the entire country. Thousands of innocent people were deported to concentration camps or executed. Soviet propaganda machine used Kirov's death as a pretext to make the population believe that many enemies of the state had concealed themselves in the general population. They claimed these would wait until the revolutionary enthusiasm would completely fade away. Then they would attack the Soviet Union from within. In reality, Stalin had prompted the assassination for political purposes. He wanted the entire population to live in fear so that they became more compliant with the will of the Communist Party. To be more precise, people should follow Stalin's whims.

In Michelsdorf, the KGB took Kirov's assassination as an opportunity to realize an agenda: to get rid of any remainders of German patriotism, and to get rid of the church. As already mentioned, the inhabitants of Michelsdorf were a very degenerate Germans, unlike the population of Olgino and Karlsfeld. Michelsdorf's inhabitants, by being isolated in the Caucasus mountains, had gotten away from their German culture, and only maintained their fanatical, degraded form of Lutheranism. By contrast, our present teaching staff had preserved German culture and language. The people of Michelsdorf were stirred by seeing German culture exposed by the teachers, and appreciate their heritage. This would enable parents to transmit their German culture to the next generation. That was the teacher's plan, but obviously, was opposed by the agenda of the Soviet government and KGB. The KGB had now realized their plans by depriving the school of their best German teachers. Additionally, they weakened the most active members of the church by intimidating them. Everyone became silent.

That year, they “purified” Michelsdorf school of all German teachers. As already mentioned, three of them had been deported. The best two teachers had to move to the city at the end of the school year. I was among them. We had been more or less forced to do this. In the end, Dubs was the only one who was left, but in the end, he also had to go. From the beginning of the new school year onwards, Dubs’ intention had been to get rid of the three teachers I mentioned. So, he had provided the KGB with false and defamatory materials about his opponents. The KGB cooperated with him up to a point. (The school was unable to find new teachers for the upcoming school year.) It had become known that Dubs had worked against his colleagues despite all secretiveness. [238] After the KGB had learned about Dubs, they examined him, and exposed him as the biggest “enemy of the people.” It became public that Dubs had been a pastor with formal theological education. He ousted his colleagues because he thought that they had become too strong. He was supposed to have only enjoyed working with teachers who did what he wanted, according to his official instructions. This time he didn’t get obedient teachers. In short, the biter was bitten. He was the last teacher of the Micheldorf school who was deported to a strictly managed concentration camp. He could have even met his victim, Martins, there. We never heard of him again.

I want to mention one more thing. The teacher Martins was a tall, strong man. He had dark hair, but it was not crow-black. He was good-looking, smart, and practical. He was also uncomplicated and friendly. He was so shocked upon receiving capital punishment that he fainted. After his lawyer had convinced the Supreme Soviet to lessen his penalty, Martins’ wife and I drove to the city’s prison. They had released him from the death cell, and he was now imprisoned in a normal cell. We were shocked by his look. Within four days, his hair had turned grey. However, his hair had not only become grey, but he had become a grey man. His wife was a small woman, just reaching to his shoulders. She was a hearty, caring, clever person. Martins’ family was relatively well off. She decided to move to where her husband was deported so that she could support him. I hope that good luck, and God’s support helped her to realize her plan.

Now I want to report how my colleague Friedrich Föll and I had to go through purgatory. After the entire church council, and other active church members (in total, 17 people) had been tried and deported (the court proceedings had taken place in January), the school took possession of the church building to establish classrooms in it. It was a simple edifice consisting of one big hall. The church tower was on the façade, and there were three arches from the entrance to the hall. The bells of the church tower were already gone, ordered pulled down, and seized by the Soviet government. Only a little bell hung on a bell beam. It tinkled whenever a large event began. The little bell hung there as if it was an orphan, left behind by its bell family. They used to ring the bells in a way suitable to the occasion: they announced joyful celebrations, called for silence, or made people aware of grief. The little bell that had a silvery sound had been part of that choir. You could always hear it whenever there was a ceremonial ringing of bells. Since the bell family was gone, the little orphan bell started a completely new life. Now it would inform a crowd of children about the beginning and ending of classes in the former church. I do not know whether the little bell enjoyed its new duties. They had not asked it; rather, they forced the little bell to do it. In the same manner, they had imprisoned the people who had been in charge of the

little bell. [239] When I once caught sight of the little bell, I remembered the following lines from Ludwig Uhland's poem *Of the Singer's Curse*:

There is a column left testifying former splendour.
Alas, this column is already broken;
It could fall apart tonight.

The Communist Party and KGB were determined to create a similar situation. The Communists had been disturbed by Micheldorf's church, and its congregational life for a long time. They thought that the church was responsible for the persistent conservative mindset of the local population. The government, and its loyal KGB, took Kirov's assassination as an opportunity to launch a devastating attack against the church. It began by the arrest of the entire church council. In that same moment, the church building was seized. The villagers were intimidated by the mass arrests, and saw themselves forced to consent to the government's action at the first town meeting. At that same meeting, it was also decided to transform the church building into a school building. That primarily meant that they had to take down the cross from the church tower. They had no difficulty deciding to do this on a Sunday.

At the very beginning of the school year, a young Komsomol¹ worker from Leningrad had been ordered to organize and lead a communist youth group at our school. Overall, he was a good, smart, and funny boy who was enthusiastic about singing. The Soviets ordered him to remove the cross from the bell tower. The officials wanted this to be a political event. On Sunday morning, young and old gathered at the church square. These included officials, militia and physicians (a misfortune could have happened). The young man arrived at the square with a long rope draped over his shoulder. A long ladder stood at the main building, while a smaller one was attached to the rope. Without hesitation, the boy climbed up the tall ladder and pulled up the small one to the roof of the church building. He positioned the small ladder at the bell tower, and quickly climbed up. He threw the rope around the cross. He then pulled himself up to the roof of the church tower until he had reached the cross. He successfully removed the cross from its frame, then saluted, and shouted, "The cross will come down." He slowly loosened the frame, and threw the cross onto the cobblestone pavement. It was an old wooden cross, so it broke into many pieces. The hero of the day then threw the end of his rope through the opening of the removed cross and attached his rope to the bell beam. Then he eased himself down from the roof until he reached the smaller, and later the larger ladder. When he arrived at the ground, the officials greeted him with handshakes. Afterward, he saluted and shouted, "The order of the Communist Party and Soviet government is complete!" It was horrible to witness this event. We had watched the entire event through the windows of our room. The large crowd reached to the houses at the edge of the church square. The ridiculed church was on one side, our apartment was on the other.

[240] From time to time, you can observe that people with varying opinions on the rare occasion do come together. There were supporters and critics who responded to this event in very different ways. Both groups had prepared expressions of their positive and negative

¹ The *All-Union Leninist Young Communist League* was known as Komsomol

sentiments. Young Communists and Pioneers started to cheer as the cross fell on the cobblestones, while others laughed. And a third group complained. However, the majority of the elderly people watched the entire wrongdoing in silence, holding their resentment and hatred in their hearts. Many of them had tears. Some people pressed themselves to the walls of nearby houses, their faces turned, even leaned their foreheads against the wall. They stood, kneeled, or prayed. After the gathering was dispersed, a group of women came together. We could hear them singing, “Do I want to be a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb? Do I want to stand for Jesus? Do I want to bear His sufferings?”¹

Looking through the open window of our apartment, we could witness the varying emotional responses in detail. We were afraid.

Even before the nervous crowd had dispersed, the Young Communists showed up with wagons. They loaded all the church furniture (benches, tables, chairs, and the pulpit) on them to bring it to their clubhouse. In any case, the church had become a warehouse for them. Their clubhouse had been quite empty until that day. After this, they brought the desks from the schoolrooms where Friedrich Föll and I used to teach. On Saturday, the headmaster had already informed us that from then on our classes would occur in the former church building. Consequently, we needed to create classrooms there. On Monday, the lessons had continued without any disruption. So, Sunday afternoon Friedrich Föll and I met inside the church to prepare for our classes. In order to have two rooms for our classes, we separated the church interior into two rooms with a folding screen so that each classroom would have an independent exit. (There was a second exit at the back of the building leading to the yard.)

After we had finished, Mrs. Komotzkaya, the head of the local council, and the headmaster came by. Both were satisfied with our work, and gave us some instructions. It was clear that the parents of our pupils had to pay something for the radical conversion of the church building into a school. They were afraid that some parents might even forbid their children to go to the new school in protest against the conversion. Therefore, they asked Friedrich Föll and me to visit the parents to convince them to give up resistance, and allow their children to go to school to continue their education without delay. During each break, we had to report absentee students to the head of the local council since he wanted to restore peace and order as quickly as possible. These worries turned out to be justified. By Wednesday, however, all pupils were arriving on time for class. [241] Our pupils’ parents began to recognize that it was beyond their control to stop the course of Russian history. Our former little lonely church bell also became used to its new duty. With its silver tone, it reminded us when we had to start the lesson, and when it was time for the children to have a break for recess.

This is the way time passed until the end of the school year. We teachers can testify that our pupils worked as much as they could. Likewise, the parents of our pupils, and the officials confirmed that we had diligently done our duty.

¹ Quote from the German hymn: *Will ich des Kreuzes Streiter sein*

Without doubt, they were satisfied with our work. Nonetheless, after I had accounted for my work, and received my vacation certificate, our boss said, "David Ivanovich, you need to go to the city where they will tell you what will happen next." I sensed what would happen to me. On the next day, I contacted the Ministry of Education. After a warm welcome, and a mutual introduction, they told me that they were content with my work. They had gained the conviction that I had nothing to do with my brother's offence. However, I had to understand that I could not continue to work at my school since my brother had been arrested. My documents were in order, but I had to accept that I had to leave. I didn't understand why.

So, our time in Michelsdorf came to a close. Where were we supposed to go now? After thinking about this, I concluded that I could not escape what had happened in Michelsdorf. Wherever I went, I would not be able to avoid the KGB, as I would always need to present myself to them, no matter where we went to live.

Firstly, we needed to figure out where to move. After some reflection, we decided to go to Rutschenkov-Stalino, where family members now lived: my parents; my sister Tina; and my sister Sara, and her two children, who had moved from Moscow. All of them had passed the KGB's investigations. Besides, the city was only 30 kilometres from Nordheim, where Katja's parents lived. If I was ever arrested, she could still have a good life there. Hence, we returned to our home district.

We finished the preparation for our travel shortly. Our family had been told about our situation, and had invited us to come. We sent a telegram to Tina, and we brought our luggage to the train. I went to the local council office to show them my travel documents and my train ticket. I told Mrs. Komtzkaya, the head of the local council, where I was going. I showed her my train tickets, and I gave an open envelope to her, where she saw Tina's exact address. In front of her, I put all my documents except my passport in the envelope, then put the envelope in another one on which I had written the address of the KGB in Stalino. I asked Mrs. Komtzkaya to mail it personally to the KGB together with her confirmation of my departure. I also asked her to put into the envelope anything else she would like. Moreover, I would allow her to ask the local KGB to send it on. [242] When I handed over my two envelopes to Mrs. Komtzkaya, she became pale. She looked at me seriously, but I did not shift my gaze away from her. I said to her, "Do me this favour, please? Prove that we are friends!" We then shook hands. In addition, she said, "Well, I will do it." I thanked her and left the room.

I went to my little family who had been waiting for me. We said goodbye to our landlords, and slowly walked to the train station where our train to Beslan's central station would arrive in ten minutes. The train arrived. Sitting in our compartment, we looked at Michelsdorf in its beautiful setting for the last time. Was I supposed to say, "Goodbye," or "See you again" to Michelsdorf? We lost sight of the village before I had made up my mind. It turned out that "See you again" would have been the correct response. I would visit the village again four years later. This was the day that the chapter of the Micheldorf purge ended.

A New Chapter Begins: Rutschenkovo-Stalino

While travelling, I had time to think about how to start a new life. I realized that I needed to find a new job as quickly as possible. I was not sure whether I would be able to find a teaching position for three reasons. First of all, I was in a difficult political situation. Secondly, it was now the summer vacation (June). Last, but not least, it was very difficult to be hired as an early-career teacher at a Russian-language school. After we had arrived at our family, Sara advised me to find work at the coal mine as quickly as possible to avoid being unemployed. Everyone was hired immediately at the coal mine. Furthermore, working in the coal mine would provide me with a good supply of food. (At that time, food was still distributed by a ration system. Miners had the best supply.) I needed to prove that I was not indolent. I followed Sara's advice since she was the member of our family best informed about the political situation. I had joined the underground coal miners in a week. I transformed from teacher to coal miner. I traded the classroom for the underground. It hadn't been an easy decision for me. My little, caring mother started to cry. I was the first member of our family who would work in a mine. Germans in Russia avoided working in coal mines. It was perilous work, but apart from this, Germans despised the Russian word for coal miners, *Shakhter*¹— it sounded awful to them. They considered mining to be a debasing occupation for human beings. My parents, my mother at least, still held this view of mining. My father and my siblings had a different take on it. But my entire family felt sorry for me,

Things happened just as I had expected. Soon after I had started work, the local KGB ordered me to report. We were still living at Sara's house when a car pulled up in front of the door. They asked for me. One moment later, I had to quickly say goodbye to my family, and they took me away, I did not know where. [243] This interrogation was brief. They only took my personal data: my workplace, my working hours, and my working schedule. (At that time, miners needed to get a work schedule that always set the shifts and working hours in advance for an entire month. A miner always had to carry his schedule with him.) I showed my work schedule to the KGB officials. According to my free time, they scheduled an appointment where I had to go to the main KGB office in Stalino. I also was given written notification of the date and time of the appointment. Lastly, the officials said to me, "Do not forget your passport. You are released!" Then, I went home where all my housemates had gathered to discuss the situation.

When the time of the appointment arrived, I went to the main KGB office in Stalino. At the entrance, I showed my passport, and the document already mentioned. I proceeded to the door with the number written on the appointment notification accompanied by militiamen. One of these men pressed a button on the door, it opened, and a man sat behind a desk in front of us wearing the uniform of a KGB colonel. He was barely moving. My escort reported me. He was then ordered to step away while I was ordered to sit down in front of the large desk that was covered by a green tablecloth. A thick softbound folder laid on a sheet of glass (about 50 x 80 cm) on the tabletop. The KGB colonel and I looked at each other for a second. Then he then said, "Your family name is Toews." I replied to him,

¹ Шахтер

“Toews, David Ivanovich.” The examination began. He asked me all possible questions, throwing around all possible interrogative words that a Russian dictionary includes: Where? When? How long? How much? Why? For what reason? With whom? Yes, or no? And so forth. I tried my best to provide precise and resolute answers to all his questions. He asked me whether I thought that I would conceal anything from him. I gave him a brief answer, “No.” He asked me whether I thought that he would know the truth about me. I replied that I had told him my entire life story exactly and accurately, which he already knew. Furthermore, I didn’t doubt that he had already got to know my parents, my sisters Sara and Tina, and maybe even other members of my family. My interlocutor then asked why I assumed that he had read my life story beforehand. I replied to him that I had not been not entirely sure about that, but that I supposed Kamotzkaya must have sent him my documents including my life story from Michelsdorf. The next question was why I chose to proceed in this way. I explained that I wanted to show the administration in Michelsdorf that I had not been afraid of returning to my home district. Apart from this, I also had wanted to be open to the local KGB in Stalino. The colonel asked me why this was. I replied that I had been aware that there was no way to avoid the KGB, and I had not wanted to cause any delay. He then posed the question whether I thought that I would be soon released from KGB interest. [244] I said, “I hope and believe so.” The boldness of my own words frightened me, so I added, “Pardon me, Sir.” The colonel determinedly replied, “We will examine you until we get everything we need from you.” However, he drew out an envelope from the folder, and asked me whether I knew the envelope. After I had affirmed that I did, he cautioned me that this must not have been the envelope I meant. I remained silent.

He continued and raised a further question, “I see that your documents are fine. You seem to be a good teacher. I wonder why you decided to become a miner although you are a teacher.” I answered him: “I cannot give you a short answer without an explanation. During the present summer months, I would not have found a teaching position before 1 September even if someone would have hired me. I needed to earn money immediately to support my family. Moreover, I did not have the necessary documents since I put all my documents in the envelope that you have. In addition, I could not count on finding a job at a Russian school as a German teacher. Last but not least, I am not afraid of any job. It does not matter where I need to work. I will do a good job anywhere.” The colonel interrupted, “Furthermore, you thought that you could have been arrested. You might have lacked the political credibility to become a teacher. Am I right?” I replied, “I did not believe that I would have been arrested. However, I doubted whether I would have been able to get a teaching position.” He continued the examination, “Are you not confident in your political reliability?” I answered, “I know you can fully trust me.” The colonel replied, “Well, we will see. This is enough for now. You can take your documents. However, in future, we will have to talk about other things.” Saying this, he handed the envelope to me, took my appointment notification, and added a new date to it. He returned it to me and pressed a button. I looked at the notification. The next appointment would be in one week. The militiaman reappeared at the door, and accompanied me to the outside door. I said goodbye to him. I thought, “The washing has begun. We will see when it will end.”

I was allowed to continue my education. I was admitted to the university department for workers without difficulty because I was a coal miner. How long would I be able to do

this? Attending a Russian-speaking adult school contributed much to my education. I was able to complete my general education. I was especially able improve my Russian language skills. That gave me new optimism, and mitigated the disappointment I felt every time I needed to go to the coal mine. Before I reached the mine, I had to walk three kilometers from home, and had to cover the same distance when returning. I was not used to mine work. It was a dirty and dangerous job due to spill incidents. There was the simple saying: No one can do anything against the things that came from above. If the supports fell apart, no one would be able to hold them. Moreover, the insulation on the electrical components of the machines was often damaged leading to sudden, unexpected, and unavoidable deaths. By contrast, spill accidents caused slow deaths by suffocation. [245] Both options were equally bad.

During this time, I never spoke with my family about the perils threatening miners. The miners lacked everything. In addition to this, the administration of the mine acted irresponsibly. Accidents occurred more or less daily. My sister Tina was well informed about the bad state of coal mining. During the more than ten years she had been working at the local hospital, she had treated coal miners who had experienced accidents, and had attended many operations on these poor victims. She barely ever talked about these patients now that I was a coal miner, too. Nonetheless, my parents did learn about some accidents now and then. This news would immediately shock my mother and my wife. How could I ever prevent them from being worried? In addition, the coal miners had barely any sense of morality. Whenever coal miners talked to each other, they used to rail and swear using expressions and idioms that no censor would allow. Insufficient education is not always the reason for slandering, imprudent behaviour, impatience, ruthlessness, or a nervous personality. Sociologists and psychologists say they often observe that people who are in constant danger, and feel threatened exhibit these negative traits (like front-line soldiers, sailors, and miners). Coal miners often behaved normally, politely, and respectfully when on the street, spending time with their family, or talking to public authorities. The very same coal miners would display the opposite behaviour after entering the elevator of the mine. That was small comfort. I often found it difficult to understand their behaviour. I didn't feel at home in the mine. Also, the work as such was not easy. I had learned how to work with a shovel at my parents' farm, so I was able to get the work done. Every day, the work got easier for me. After receiving the first pay, I was happy since I had earned well.

The next KGB hearing concerned my brother Gerhard. The colonel always asked the same questions, and I always answered the same way. The colonel became nervous, while I tried to remain calm as much as possible. I then noticed that my calm behaviour was what made the colonel so nervous. After a debate in my own mind, I concluded that I would win if the colonel pretended to be angry. However, if the colonel went further, and decided to use violence against me, I would be lost in any case. So, I didn't change my strategy. The colonel became aware of my approach. I then saw that he really got angry at me. As he struck the desk with his fist, I became afraid, and I probably turned pale. However, I remembered my brother, and the teachers, Mathis and Martins, when the colonel threatened me with arrest. Without further consideration, I said, "I can't do anything against your power. Please, tell me what you want?" I saw how he pressed the button and seized my documents. The militiaman who attended me appeared, and escorted me out of the room.

[246] When I was back on the street, I looked at my documents, and I saw that I would have another hearing in two weeks.

In the meantime, I continued to work in the mine and attend adult school. The lessons and the hours I spent preparing for them were a glimmer of sunshine for me. I easily learned the detailed materials, and tutored weaker students with extra lessons. I enjoyed doing some work related to pedagogy. After a short while, I notice that there were colloques among my students. Of course, I did not find that out immediately since I could not have known all the miners. Through my students, my colleagues became aware that I was a teacher. When the KGB unit of my coal mine was informed about this, they too summoned me. They asked me why I worked in the coal mine although I was a teacher. They wanted to know the reason for this, and other things. On this occasion, I remembered the adage, “Don’t do anything good to anyone, otherwise bad things will happen to you.” After I had shown the KGB men my summons to the KGB headquarters, they left me alone. I wondered, “When will this end?”

But the struggle went on. The KGB continued to put pressure on me for a while, even though I did a good job. It didn’t matter that I thought they were content with my work. Again and again, the KGB found something dubious and suspicious about me that they could suspect. I got the impression that the sword of Damocles hung over my head. According to the Greek legend, the horsehair on which the sword hung could break anytime so that the sword would fall and kill. In fact, that was the main idea behind the terror tactics of the KGB. It was about keeping the population in distress. They wanted to see that those they interrogated trembled in fear.

And so, the colonel asked me about my father’s dispossession and exile during one hearing. I had to relate the entire story, starting from the misfortunate incident of the sleigh until my father’s dispossession.

At the next meeting, the colonel told me that my report about my father had turned out to be true. They had double checked. He also informed me that H. Rempel, who had been responsible for my father’s dispossession and exile, had been arrested for murdering innocent people, and other crimes. At that moment, he was detained in a cell in the KGB building, and would soon be tried. Rempel was also charged with libeling my father and its consequences. The judge would also inquire about these accusations. The colonel asked whether my father and I would be interested in testifying against Rempel. We had to consider returning to Nordheim to reclaim his properties since my father had never been a member of the collective farm. By law, he was still the legal owner of his former possessions. I then explained to the colonel that my father had never accepted Rempel’s behaviour. Indeed, my father was convinced that it had been illegal to be treated as a kulak. His dispossession, therefore, was also against the law. My father regretted how much we had suffered from this. However, my father was a Christian believer. Therefore, he would never testify against someone because of worldly belongings. [247] In addition, my father would never return to Nordheim. We, siblings, took good care of my parents because we all had more-or-less good jobs for sufficient earnings. Apart from this, my father knew he would die soon because of having cancer for two years. Speaking about myself, I was also

unwilling to be a witness. I only wished that I could eventually do my work in peace. I wanted to learn and work to unleash my full potential.

During my talk, the colonel looked at me carefully the entire time. He then said to me that he would send me to one of his colleagues. Upon this, he pressed the button as usual. A woman appeared whom he ordered to take me to her office to get to know me.

About a minute later, we sat across from each other. She began to ask all the questions I already knew would be asked. At this point, I would soon know them all by heart. However, after she had asked two or three questions, the thick woman gave me a house number for our next meeting. She then pressed a button, and my militiaman showed up and took me to the outside door.

On the day of the appointment, I took the tram to the city centre. Upon getting off the train, I already caught sight of the street sign with the name where the building was located. To find the right house number, I needed to turn right at the corner. The building was two blocks away. It was in the next quarter, so to speak. The building consisted of a complex of various houses. They occupied the entire block. They had been built on all four sides, and each house had an inner courtyard. There were impressive paled gates leading from the courtyards to the street. Next to them, you saw a front gate. A watchman with guns stood in front. As I stopped in front of him, he saluted me. After showing him my invitation, he pressed a hidden button. We waited for a second, then heard a melodious bell ringing with two different sounds. The watchman saluted me again, and said, "Please. Wait." He turned away and disappeared. The door opened, and I saw in front of me the woman who had given me the house number standing in a very brightly lit door frame. I greeted her, and gave her the note. She politely said, "Comrade Toews, please, come in." I entered the building and followed. I thought to myself, "Why does she call me comrade?" This was the first time I had heard the word comrade in this kind of situation. Similarly, none of these people had ever used the word "please." [248] In the meantime, we reached the closet, and the woman said, "Please, take off your coat, Comrade Toews." I sensed that she was timid. What did this mean? We entered a room where, in the middle of the room, stood a table covered by a white tablecloth with four chairs. All the furniture of the room was of the same style. She said, "Will you take a seat?" I took one of the chairs that were at the table, and sat down. The woman did the same across from me. She then pointed to a cigarette box with her hand. She asked, "Do you smoke, sir? Please, take a cigarette!" I declined her offer, although I could have used a cigarette at that moment. Back in the day, my brother Gerhard and I had toyed with cigarettes now and then. I knew enough about the different brands to immediately recognize that *Nash brend*¹ cigarettes were in front of me, at the time one of the most aromatic brands of Russian cigarettes.

The woman told me that she got the impression that I had wondered whether I should have addressed her as a normal citizen, or as a comrade. She pointed out that I was not in an office but in her private apartment. This was not a KGB appointment but a private meeting. She asked me to address her as Comrade Ranovitsch. I pulled myself together. At our first meeting, I had already noticed that she was an Israelite (not to say a Jew).

¹ "Our Brand"

Ranovitsch was 100 percent Jewish. She said to me, “I invited,” (I think ordered would have been a better word), “you because of my daughter. She struggles to learn German at school. I wonder whether you could help her by giving her some extra German lessons. Would you like to do that? Before making a decision, I would like to introduce you to her.” I replied, “Well?” With that, Mrs. Ranovitsch stood up, and went aside, soon returning with her daughter. She then introduced Schura¹ to me. The girl greeted me politely, and we all sat down. I thought to myself, “How should I behave now?” I decided to act the way a teacher is expected to act. But my question remained as to how I should address Schura. Should I refer to her with the formal “*Sie*” or informal “*Du*”. Both mother and daughter were hesitant to answer questions. So, I explained, “Each school, if not each individual teacher, has their own policies. In general, you’ll find that teachers address their pupils with the formal address from the eighth grade onwards unless teacher and student agree. That’s the reason for my question.” I had already guessed the mother’s next question. She asked, “What is your personal preference?” I wanted to provide her with a detailed answer. I explained, “Students from varying social backgrounds understand the question of which pronoun to use, and students have different opinions. In any case, it is the teacher’s duty to protect student’s dignity. [249] I personally think that using formal address increases the distance between people. In my opinion, decreasing this distance benefits teachers and students. Therefore, I leave it to my pupils to decide whether I should address them with *Sie* or *Du*.” Schura then replied to me, “Please, use *Du*.” I thanked her. Schura then read some paragraphs from her grammar book.

After this, I asked her some questions in German. In the meantime, Schura’s mother had left us, and gone to a side room. I was sure that she was standing just behind the door to overhear our conversation. Therefore, I asked the girl to write down some questions in Russian and German for our next lesson to indicate difficulties so I could provide her with adequate help. She promised to do that. As Schura’s mother re-entered the room, I assured her that I knew what to do to help Schura. I handed my appointment calendar to her to let her choose an appropriate date. As I was ready to leave, she gave me her hands, and thanked me. She then pressed some button. After stepping out of the door, the watchman stood ready to escort me to the exit.

Back on the street, I walked slowly to my tram station. I looked all around to make sure that no one saw me nearby, and I uttered in a low voice, “Phew!” I spat on the pavement in front of me. It was incredible to me what the evil administration dared to do! I was convinced that asking me to provide extra lessons for the girl was purely a trap. It was nothing else than a Jewish snare! Why did they want to harm the Germans? Hadn’t the Germans, especially the Mennonites, welcomed every Jew in consideration that they were descendants of Jacob and were God’s people. I could certainly understand that the Jews were hostile towards those who had been responsible for the past pogroms. Alas, how naïve we Mennonites have been. I even wondered whether we were still naïve. In this case, we deserved it. I had to work every day for eight hours underground until my shirt was completely soaked with sweat. Then, in addition, I needed to walk three kilometers to reach the mine, and I had to walk another three kilometers to return. Before stilling my hunger or taking a rest, I was forced to go for “walks” that stressed me out. I was on the verge of

¹ *He added:* Schura is the nickname for Alexandra, and the Jewish name for Sarah.

losing my mind. Yet I was determined to go to all the repetitive meetings so long as it would please these cannibals. I was eager to survive and live! My goodness!

And then I returned to Mrs. Ranovitsch's building at the appointed time. I sat at the table in the antechamber awaiting her daughter. Schura appeared, carrying her notebook and grammar book under her arm. I almost stood up for her. The students of general schools used to wait for the teacher. They stood up when the teacher entered the classroom. [250] It was reversed here. These people enjoyed it if someone stood up for them. They even preferred if someone kneeled. They feel great satisfaction when others trembled before them as if it was natural behaviour.

By the way, Schura was a very nice child. She was lovely, and tidy as it was demonstrated by her notebooks. She greeted me politely. She paid attention to my explanations. Her first question on the very first day was how she was supposed to address me. I was shocked. I stared at her and asked, "Didn't your mother tell you my name? Didn't I introduce myself? I am truly sorry." I took a sheet, and wrote David Ivanovich on it. "My students call me by this name." The girl was surprised by my name. She said, "I have an Uncle David, too." I thought that that wasn't surprising it being a truly Jewish name. I said, "Your uncle, Schura? Well, you will not have any difficulties remembering my name then." I was quite confident that her mother had already told her my name. After this, Schura presented her questions to me. I answered them all, and also noted down some of my answers. While speaking to her, I gradually used more German words. In doing so, I became aware that she really did not need extra German lessons. There had to be another reason behind these extra lessons. Yet I concealed my suspicions. Our lesson went well based on mutual trust. At the end of the lesson, I asked the girl to repeat some class materials. Mrs. Ranovitsch then entered, and asked me whether her daughter had done a good job. I assured her that her daughter would assuredly pass the class. Upon this, Mrs. Ranovitsch's face turned a little bit red. I looked directly at her without saying a word. All three of us said goodbye to each other. My arrival and departure from the house always followed the same procedures. Mrs. Ranovitsch pressed a button, and a watchman came. My third visit went more or less the same way. It was confirmation of my conviction that our lessons were really a trap. I thought about how I could make the Ranovitsch family aware of my displeasure.

I had one week to ponder my problem. I came up with an idea. I might have the chance to do something about Mrs. Ranovitsch if I could figure out who her husband was. You would have better access to the child if you knew the father. I did not see any opportunity to have an open discussion with Schura's mother. Apart from this, there would be no way for me to escape if I didn't take the initiative since Mrs. Ranovitsch worked for the KGB. She could just squash me like a bug. Even though she was worn down, she behaved like a granite block. Before noticing that she was worn down, she could have acted more cunningly than Potiphar's wife by bringing Joseph—me—to jail. In this way, she would have turned me into fertilizer for crops (Genesis 39:7 and following). My story also proves the words of the experienced man, "Revenge, revenge—no revenge can compete with a women's revenge." I thought to myself, "The risk is too great! Take care!" I needed to begin with Schura. Children are more honest than their parents. In addition to this, children are more likely to wear down their parents as much as parents wear down their intelligent

children. Furthermore, Schura was an intelligent child. She might have been under the influence of her parents, but she still had a sense of justice. I could take a risk, considering this child's character. I could dare to take some risk. [251] I asked myself how I would accomplish my plan. First of all, I needed to gain the child's trust, and to assure myself of this. Then other things would go smoothly.

Next time, we all met at the round table in Mrs. Ranovitsch's apartment. Both mother and daughter had a friendly greeting. Mrs. Ranovitsch's suddenly said, "Today, my daughter has many questions." To this, Schura said, "Do not worry! I will ask myself." I responded, "That is fine. A teacher will sometimes feel ambivalent if students have many questions about the topic at the beginning of the lesson. At first, he might think that he hasn't explained the lesson well. In this case, he feels a little bit reserved. However, when noticing that the student's questions are not immediately about the lesson, he is happy because he has provoked the student's thinking." "These questions address several problems," Mrs. Ranovitsch said. "It is not about your explanations. They were good." I said that I hoped I could answer these. "However, a teacher is not omniscient," I continued. "Also, he always learns new things. What was Lenin's motto?" Schura immediately responded, "Learn, learn, and learn!"

The child began to ask her questions. Her mother still sat in the room. Apparently, she wanted to stay with us. Schura asked various questions. I noticed that not all the questions were Schura's alone. I didn't care who had come up with the questions. I wanted to find out whether these questions were a result of an interest in the learning materials, or whether they were aimed at getting information from me. The most important thing was that I answered all questions in a clear and detailed manner. During the conversation. I was always curious about what question would come next. I got the impression that everything went well. When Schura posed the question of why I thought that using *Du* instead of *Sie* would build more trust, I said, "I want to answer this question after I have answered all your other questions." By this answer, I achieved my goal. I won some additional time for this answer. I felt inwardly very happy wondered whether Schura had made up that question. However, this wasn't the main issue in any case. For now, it was important to seize the opportunity to realize my plan by answering this question about trust between teacher and student. I hoped that I would be able to convey my thoughts logically so that my interlocutors could easily follow them. I laid down my opinion on the trust between student and teacher as this way. "The relationship between teacher and student must be based on trust, respect, and simplicity, otherwise teaching and learning will not work. The teacher should express his respect for the student by treating him like a normal human, and member of society. In other words, the teacher and the student must be on an equal footing. Through simplicity, the teacher endeavours to gain the student's trust. In doing so, the teacher makes it easier for the student to approach him when encountering problems or difficulties, or having questions without feeling hesitant, anxious, or unfamiliar with the teacher. The teacher appreciates and understands a student's trust. [252] When the teacher breaches the trust between him and his student, he betrays loyalty. In this case, the students' faith in their educator is weakened, if not completely destroyed. As a result, the student stops relying on the teacher. In the worst case, faith previously felt by the students can even evolve into hatred and contempt so that friendship between teacher and student is finished. The friendship between teacher and his student is similar to that of parents and child. Also,

parents address their children with *Du*. My belief that the teacher is supposed to be the best friend of the child other than their parents, so I assume that I build a closer relationship with my students when I am allowed to address them with *Du*. I thank you, Schura, that you allowed me to use *Du*. I am happy about this. Please, pardon me!"

Both mother and daughter listened attentively to me. I noticed that she had constantly shifted her gaze from herself to me. I felt relieved that I had been able to deliver myself on this subject. I then asked whether the time had not come to begin our lesson. However, Mrs. Ranovitsch then asked me the following question, "You think it makes it easier for the student to approach you by addressing you with *Du*. Are your students and their parents also allowed to address you with "*Du*?" I replied to her, "I cannot answer this question with one word. Nonetheless, I will try my best to explain. The world is always changing. Evolution is the primary reason why nature is gradually, slowly changing. Human society can change as a result of evolutionary processes. In addition, human societies sometimes develop by revolutions that radically break with the past, especially in our modern age. Consider our October Revolution for example. By contrast, the shift from *Sie* to *Du* is a slow development. It is uncommon that students call their teachers *Du*. Nonetheless, it is not unusual that the teachers use informal address to their students, while the students continue to address the teacher formally. Colleagues address themselves with *Du* in the private, but they use *Sie* in their professional life. I also address my parents formally. However, my son calls me *Du*. We are his parents, and friends at the same time. That is my view on this matter. Yet some people might have a different opinion." After these words, we remained silent for some seconds. When Mrs. Ranovitsch stood up, and was leaving the room, she said, "Thank you."

Even though I thought I might have gone too far, I changed my mind at the same moment. I was willing to take a risk. I was even eager to take the extreme risk. While I was conversing with Schura, I noticed that she still seemed impressed by my previous talk. I unexpectedly asked her, "Does your mother speak or understand German?" She nodded her head a little bit absentmindedly, and added, "A little bit." However, I saw that she was frightened, and I whispered to her, "Be honest with me! Do you really need these extra lessons? Did you get bad grades in German?" She replied, "No. Yet my parents want me to take some extra lessons. [253] Please, don't tell them that I told you!" I said, "Don't worry, Schura. You can trust me." I continued, "You are tired today, Schura, aren't you? I am tired, too. I had to work longer than usual in the coal mine." She was shocked and asked, "What mine? Where are you working?" I replied, "I am working in coal mine 31 on the assembly line. Can't you see this when you look at my black eyes and hands?" While speaking, I showed her my hands. "After working in the mine for a long period, you get black eyelashes and eyebrows." At this moment, we heard her mother walk into the room. Therefore, I said in a louder voice, "Well, see you next time." Upon these words, I handed my appointment calendar to Mrs. Ranovitsch. After this, it went as usual. She pressed the button, the watchman appeared, and brought me to the street.

After being out of the watchman's sight, the one who used to salute me, I groaned in a low voice. I then breathed and said to myself, "Now, I need to make a decision. It has to happen at some point." I entered my apartment, where we all still lived together, my father, my mother, my sister Tina, Katja and me, and our child. My wife asked me, "What ever

happened to you? You look so pale.” I replied, “I am tired. Let’s go to bed. Are our parents already sleeping?” Katja answered, “Come in, everyone is already asleep. I have a bottle of lemonade. Let’s drink it.” Indeed, that was good for me. I thanked my wife. After a few minutes, it seemed that I had forgotten all my worries and thoughts, and immediately fell asleep.

The next morning, I slept a little bit longer. I had to change my work shift. Today, I didn’t have to be at the mine until 2 pm. For one week, I had this shift. The next week, I would have a morning shift. When I got up in the morning, everyone was already awake. My father and my wife had gone to different shops. Father wanted to buy bread, and would return in about one hour. Yet Katja wanted to get some fat, and something else, but she would have to wait a long time in line for these. As usual, my sister Tina was already at work in the hospital. Only my mother was at home. During our conversation, my mother was able to comfort me through her favorite saying as she had often done, “Winter can threaten us with spiteful gestures as much as he likes, throwing snow and ice at us. Nonetheless, spring will come.” It was still winter both metaphorically, and literally. It was February with a lot of snow on the streets. The snow looked different here from what we sang about in poems and songs. In this coal mining area, the snow looked grey, if not dark gray. On the footbridges, the snow was black. There were many piles of coal on the street. The wind swept the black coal dust from one street to the next. The wind did not spare the windows of the houses, or the barracks of the workers. Everything turned gray. The air too was full of black dust. Smoke mixed with dust filled the air. The high factory chimneys, and coke ovens constantly emitted smoke that the wind carried across the whole area.[254] Everything became black because of it. That made laundering an intolerable job. Where could clothes dry without being exposed to the black rain? This was only one of many new problems to solve.

Our housing situation was difficult. However, we improved it soon. Tina had paid for an apartment some time before without being able to move there. Therefore, we had an opportunity. The small apartment was offered to us consisting of a room (3.5 x 3.5 m), a small kitchen (3 x 3 m), and a small corridor (1.5 x 3 m). At the beginning of March, my father and I went to see the apartment on a sunny day. The room was a mess, and couldn’t be expanded—it wasn’t made of rubber. In the end, we said thank you for this roof. When we would move in, the distance to my work would be a kilometer longer. To the pit was four kilometers; the adult class was three kilometers away. Tina’s apartment was three kilometers away, while Sara’s apartment was four kilometers. We needed to walk three kilometers to get to the shops or the tram station. The apartment was a quarter of the house, but we felt as if it was our own property. It was located at the very edge of the city, so we had fresh air. There was still dust from the streets. In short, we were content. However, the day came when I had to go into the city again. How would my risk turn out? Somehow, I remained optimistic. Looking at my student’s eye gave me the impression that Schura had some sense of justice. Children did not necessarily endorse the injustice of their parents. Either way, there would be a turning point today.

As usual, the watchman accompanied me to the entrance of my “master’s” apartment. Following our routine, she said, “You are welcome here,” when I entered the room, and was brought to the round table. I walked behind Mrs. Ranovitsch. As usual, she said,

“Please, sit down!” I waited for my student, Schura, but she did not appear. I became nervous. Had I done something wrong? Had Schura been punished because of me? However, Mrs. Ranovitsch stood up and said, “My husband is ringing the bell.” I became curious. The room where we sat was connected to another by a door. I heard a man enter this room through the corridor. After some seconds, Mrs. Ranovitsch returned to my room. She showed me her hands, and she invited me to the room where her husband was. My heart was in my mouth. When I entered the room, I caught sight of a man sitting behind a black, long, and wide desk. His head was bent examining a document. The woman introduced me to him. When the man looked up at me who did I see? He was the KGB colonel who had tortured me for several months. Perhaps, my face became slightly pale. That might explain why he said, “We are not on First Line.” (People used to call the street where KGB headquarter was located First Line). We then looked at each for a minute in silence. During this time, I also looked at his desk. Up until then I had never seen a desk with such equipment, and I did not know or clearly perceive all the things that were supposed to be seen there. [255] But I can still clearly remember the pencil that was lying in front of the ink well. Half of this pencil was blue and the other half red. The length was at least 35 cm; the diameter, 3.5 cm.

The colonel began his interrogation by asking me how the German competence of his daughter was, commenting that his daughter had been content with my work. I then explained to him, “I don’t have a complete picture of the expectations of her German program. I cannot know how Schura is performing in class. I do not know whether the few lessons we had were very helpful. However, I am sure that Schura is a competent, good student. She undoubtedly will pass the class. If there were reasons for problems with the learning materials, these would be a singular instance. She can fix them herself. I am confident about this.” Schura’s father replied, “Well, why do you think it was necessary to tell Schura where you work at the moment?” I answered, “It wasn’t my intention to err. I am sorry for this. Schura directly asked me where I worked. Therefore, I felt urged to tell her.” He responded, “Well, was it really necessary to tell her that you work in a mine?” I said, “I am not ashamed of my job. Who knows, maybe fate will allow me to work as a teacher again someday.” His next question was, “Would you prefer to work as a teacher over being a coal miner?” I answered, “I believe that I won’t be able to work as a coal miner much longer. I suffer from radiculitis, and also suffer from rheumatism. In the pit, I have wet feet all the time.” My interlocutor looked at me and he then said, “I am in charge of all the investigations done, and to be done by First Line. During our last conversation, you wished that we should let you work in peace. I will release you from our interrogations. We will stop observing and troubling you unless you do something wrong. However, I don’t believe that will happen. We are finished.” With this, he reached out his hand to me.

I asked him whether I was allowed to say goodbye to Mrs. Ranovitsch and his daughter. “Please, do that” he said. He led me to the antechamber where his wife and daughter sat at the table. He said to them, “Comrade Toews wants to say goodbye.” Both gave me their hands. I left the apartment with a short bow while saying goodbye. The watchman, standing in front of the front door, saluted to me, and brought me to the building entrance. There the watchman saluted again. I slowly walked to the tram station. Here I sat down on a bench because I needed time to think. The first thought that came to my mind was that I should have said to Mrs. Ranovitsch at our farewell in the antechamber, “Goodbye! We will never

see each other again.” Yet I wondered whether I could have been so sure about that. Yet I was free for now. Was this reality? Did Schura only play a role? Did my last conversation with Schura and her mother contributed to my sudden release? Did this really matter now? I was released from the KGB issue. From now on, I didn’t need to engage in this procedure anymore. God, thank you! I am free!

[256] When I entered our apartment, everyone was still sitting around the table, busy with their work. My father and sister Tina were reading books while my mother was knitting, and Katja was darning a pair of socks. Our son Reinhard was preoccupied with his drawing book. I came to close them, embraced them, and gave everyone a heartfelt kiss. My mother said, “This is a surprise. What happened to you, my dear boy?” I only said, “It is some time since I have seen you all sitting with each other in such happiness. I am happy that we are living like this.” Father told us his good news: All necessary documents for our apartment were ready. Tomorrow we could go to the apartment to clean all the rooms. I felt sorry that I could not join my father since I had to go to work at six in the morning, and I would only come home at three pm. After this, I needed to attend the adult school until seven pm. It would take two days until the rooms were dried out. On Sunday, we would be able to move in. My mother was only worried about our new home. She wondered how it would be possible for me to walk one and a half kilometers more to work. My father, noticing my good mood, comforted my mother. He said I might not have to go to the city anymore. My mother became silent, but Tina abruptly turned away from her book to look at my face. I gave her a warm look. She understood what had happened. She drew with her fingers a cross in the air. We had never talked openly about my contacts with the KGB. My sisters Tina and Sara, and my wife knew about it. My father might have suspected, but my mother had no idea why I went into the city after work. At this moment, we all were optimistic about the future.

However, things turned out differently than expected. I noticed pain in my back that I thought resulted from too much sweating, and the air drafts in the shaft. No one was able to find out what my problem was. However, the pain gradually grew worse until a doctor called Pfuschtschenko gave me a sick note. He checked my kidneys and lungs, but he did not consider checking whether the nerves of my back were inflamed. My situation improved, and I was allowed to leave the hospital. Yet I was not permitted to return to work. In the adult school, they assured me that I would be able to catch up on the lessons I’d missed. In this way, it became clear why I suffered. It happened one day. It was a warm day, and we already lived in our new apartment. We had purchased five hens and a rooster. When returning home, I wanted to bend a little bit over the picket fence to pick up a lump. I felt something in the lower back because I had moved too quickly. I fell with my chest on the spiky stakes, and I could not move. There was a lot of pain in my chest from these points. I had the feeling that my back was going to fall apart. My neighbor and my wife had both observed the entire incident, and came running to rescue me. I could not move, and was suffering intolerable pain. No one had telephones. They laid me down on a couch. My wife ran, not walked, to my sister Tina and my parents. Their house was about two kilometers away from ours. My sister Tina immediately understood what had happened. The physician did not waste any time, and gave me an electro treatment. It took 15 to 20

days until I was recovered. However, I have suffered from radiculitis from this time onwards (1936). [257] I am still suffering from it even though today I am 86 years old¹.

I soon made up the adult school classes missed during the three weeks. Spring would come soon with awakening nature, animals, and people (also part of nature). I also resumed giving extra lessons to my peers. We all did pretty well. My colleagues in the mine began to accept that I was not interested in slurs, dirty stories, or quarrels. It turned out that the saying “bird of feather flock together” also applied to the adult school. There was an honest, and very friendly man called Romanov. (Obviously, he was not related to the imperial Romanovs). I noticed that he had been showing interest in me for a long time. He enjoyed saying and pronouncing my last name correctly. In time, he always attended my tutorials. Yes, he also needed them.

One day, Romanov and I walked part of the way home together since we had to go the same way. He asked me whether I knew a nurse whose name was Yekaterina Ivanovna Toews. When told him that this was my sister, he suddenly stopped. He looked at me for a while. After this, he embraced me and spoke to me, “Oh dear, why didn’t I realize this sooner. We have been in the same class for more than six months, but I did not dare ask you this question that’s been on my mind.” I stood in front of him, not knowing what to say. What was Romanov’s intention? In the meantime, we reached a small park close to the railway embankment. He proposed we sit down for a bit. He said, “I need to tell you how I got to know this nurse. Would you mind listening to my story?” He told me his story.

To begin with, he was a woodworker, and had worked his way up to become a specialized carpenter. During a winter hunt, he and his friends put their rifles on a sleigh. He had thrown himself down next to them on the sleigh. That’s when his rifle discharged so that a bullet hit his heel. If he hadn’t worn felt boots, it wouldn’t have been so bad, but the bullet went through the felt into his foot. The wound became infected with tetanus bacteria. We all know that only a few people who suffer from this insidious infection ever survive. In addition, these patients can’t avoid going through a lot of pain, consequences of which he and his family were aware. So, he lay in the hospital. No one, not even the medical doctors, cared for him as much as the nurse Yekaterina Ivanovna. Almost every day and every night, she attended him. She didn’t give up on him. [258] After he had survived the crises, she managed to persuade the chief physician to hire Romanov’s own wife as an assistant nurse to care solely for Romanov. In this way, either the patient’s wife or Yekaterina barely left his side for six months. He had recovered entirely from the tetanus infection. Maybe one percentage of tetanus patients recover. “Currently, I work as a teacher at a nice school. After my recovery, I was hired as a handicraft teacher. I then advanced my career. As you can see, I am still continuing my education. I will have to study for quite a long time. I don’t have an easy time, but I will eventually succeed. I am married to a nice, hard-working woman who works at the hospital. She also managed to advance her career. We are a happy family. We only owe everything we achieved to Yekaterina Ivanovna.”

¹ The manuscript has been corrected several times. The first age indicated was 74 (1983), and the last was 86 (1995). This is the only indication of the earliest date when David was writing. Being so far into the manuscript would lead to the belief that he began writing soon after he emigrated in 1978.

While telling me this, he broke down in tears. I had not interrupted him, and I now understood why this young, handsome man was already grey. I learned why he had sometimes looked at me oddly, and when there were moments when he seemed to be entirely absent minded. After being quiet for a while, he continued. "What do you think about this? Do you know how difficult it is for me to learn at adult school? And then someone helped me again for six months. The same happened to me in the hospital. All of a sudden, I find out that Yekaterina Ivanovna's brother has been helping me, and he doesn't even know it. What am I supposed to think about this coincidence?" He grasped my hands and kissed them. I noticed it had become too much for the man already marked by deep suffering. This had been very unexpected, and overwhelmed him. I suggested that we should get up, and use this experience to derive even more joy without making a big fuss about it. That calmed him down. I told him that I really appreciated the accomplishments of my sister Tina, but that it had nothing to do with me. Furthermore, I reassured him that my helping him was really nothing. There was no need to worry about this. As we shook hands, he said, "The time might come when I can return your favor." Indeed, this time would come soon.

We parted, and went our own ways. My way was still long, two and a half to three kilometres more. While I walked, I thought about how similar our lives were. I had also been a woodworker at the beginning. However, I had also advanced my career somewhat, and I was still eager to further my education. I had been negatively affected by political turmoil while my friends had suffered from disease. Both of us had lost a good portion of our nerve under duress. I was walking and wondered how long my path would be, how much time it would take until I could leave the dirty coal mine for a better life. Noah's dove was still flying with my olive leaf of hope in the sky. The dove was above the clouds of dust and smog. What was possible? What wind could dispel these clouds so that the dove could come close to me? [259] I only knew that this would happen someday. However, I did not know how soon that day would come. I didn't know when the white dove would hover over me with its leaf full of hope.

That day I worked a night shift at the coal mine. My wife and I had decided to meet at the home of my parents and Tina after adult school since their house was on my way. When I opened the apartment door, my son told me that everyone was sitting together, including his Aunt Sarah. Therefore, I could surprise everyone with a report about my encounter. I asked Tina whether she had gotten to know Mrs. Romanov at the hospital. Upon this, she told us the entire story of Romanov just as it had been related to me earlier. According to Tina's report, Mrs. Romanov had already been acquainted with the hospital. She was really a very lovely woman. Tina felt sorry for her, mainly because of her husband. He worked at some school, but he would never be able to reach his former self. She told us, "The sensory capacities of the survivors of tetanus infections diminish to the degree that they, in their short remaining life, are not able to regain all brain functions they had lost." I was shocked by my sister's words. "Will this man die soon?" I asked. Tina responded, "Why are you asking me? Did you meet Mrs. Romanov when you were in the hospital?" I answered, "No, I didn't get to know her there. Perhaps, I have seen her without knowing who she is. But her husband and I have become friends." Then I reported what had happened. I said that I would feel very sorry if the man would soon die. We now recalled the fate of Gerhard Rogalsky from Nordheim, the son of Mr. Rogalsky. Gerhard Rogalsky

and Gerhard Isaak were a little bit older than me, nonetheless, we three boys were close friends. One day, while forking manure in bare feet, Gerhard Rogalsky stabbed his foot with a pitchfork. He got tetanus. Gerhard Isaak and I watched him every day while he lay in bed. We would put a spoon in his mouth to keep his jaw open so we could pour some water down his throat. He recovered, but became mentally disabled. Afterwards, he immigrated to Canada where he soon died. Tina said, "Indeed, survivors of tetanus infection are not likely to have a long life." This remark closed the conversation.

Later, Katja, my son, and I returned home. My wife had managed to obtain some foodstuffs in the stores by stubbornly waiting in line, so we joyfully walked home.

Days followed the same routine: mine work, adult school, tutoring, relaxation, sleep, and mine work again. I met Romanov every day. We appreciated our friendship. [260] One day, when Romanov and I were going home, he told me that Ochs, the German teacher at his school, took a leave of absence, and would not return to work anymore during that school year. The reason for this was that she was going to have a baby and would cease to work. So, the administration was searching for a replacement teacher. Romanov wondered whether I would be interested in taking over her position. If so, he could speak to the headmaster on my behalf. I immediately approved his proposal. The next day, Romanov asked me to go with him to the administrator. The headmaster, who was of Greek descent, interviewed me extensively. I did not conceal anything from him. He asked whether I was aware that all new hires of teachers had to be approved by particular institutions under the present circumstances. I reassured him that I could imagine what he meant. The headmaster said, "Well, Romanov will inform you about what will happen next." As I said goodbye to him, I thought it would now become clear whether Romanov's words counted. At home, I didn't say anything about this.

Some days went by before my dove of hope found me. I was never really sure whether such a dove existed. I was invited to the school, and the headmaster offered me a teaching position. I could work teaching German to all seven grades of his school from 1 April onwards. In the last three remaining days of March, I asked for a dismissal from the coal mine. One day later, I obtained my dismissal. It was on Saturday. I was able to show the note on my official work record to the headmaster the same day. On Monday, I could teach my first German lesson. So far, I had concealed this new development from my family. But after being officially hired, I didn't just walk home but ran to my family. I wanted to share my joy with my mother, so first visited my parents. Mother had been constantly worried about me ever since I worked in the pit. I met her in the hall. She was alone. My father was taking his nap, but now he was awake. Upon hearing this news, my little mother jumped up, and limped into father's room. She always did this when she was surprised by exciting news. She related to him what had happened. He was also very happy about it. I didn't stay long with my parents, and asked father to share the news with Tina and, if possible, with Sarah too. Then I left and quickly walked to my wife and son. We had experienced suffering and disappointments together several times. We had also experienced joy together but never experienced such joy as today. Indeed, I hadn't waited in vain; my dove of hope had found me. She brought a green olive leaf to me. On Sunday, my sisters, Tina and Sara, visited to congratulate me, so we had a small celebration.

In this way, my entire family was well established again, except for my brother Gerhard who had to spend another five years in exile. We all earned enough money, had agreeable housing conditions, and were healthy too. Therefore, we were able to do our jobs. Of course, I always had to take good care of myself because of my radiculitis. But I was confident that time heals everything, and would also give me complete recovery. We were only worried about my father's cancer whenever we thought about it. At this point, he was still being treated, and the physicians gave us comfort.

My Professional and Social Advancement

The Great Terror in the Wake of Kirov's murder comes to an end. And A New Wave of Terror Begins.

[261] The planned, well-organized wave of terror that Stalin (or the "leader," "friend, or "father," to mention just a few of his titles) unleashed in response to the assassination of Sergei Kirov reached its peak from about December 1934 to June 1935, after which it gradually subsided. The general population had kept silent because of the thousands that had been executed. They now collected themselves. Fear and worry had made them silent, but now the people could breathe a little easier again. Nonetheless, people's living conditions didn't improve neither qualitatively nor quantitatively. People were not permitted to refer to it as bad, but they were unable to call it good either. Under those circumstances, they just refrained from judgement, kept quiet, and got used to it. This is how they conveyed the impression that it got better, and that they were really content with their situation. That was the general mindset from July 1936 to July 1937. Until the abolishment of the ration stamp system in 1936, workers could rely on receiving one pound of butter, one kilogram of soap, and one kilogram of sugar per month without waiting for hours in lines. Workers could always go to the shop when fewer people were there. Then the system "improved." When the ration stamp system was abolished, it was considered a significant political achievement. Instead, everyone now had to wait in line at the store to obtain anything. Shops could never offer enough products. Customer demand was never met. Everyone became eager to be first in line. You were allowed to buy as much as you wanted as long as you had enough money while the people in line after you didn't get anything. You would have to experience standing in line yourself to ever understand what that really meant. We needed to go to the shops long before they opened. We had to remember who was in front of us to prevent someone from jumping the queue. There were many loud quarrels, and violent acts. Pickpocketing flourished. Oh dear, you wouldn't believe what went on in those lines! It was terrible! There was no product you could purchase without waiting in a line. You needed to wait for bread, soap, sugar, nails, yarn or meat. It was impossible for workers to do this during their free time when they were supposed to rest or do domestic chores. So, their housemates—wives, grandparents, and children who didn't have official jobs—had to do the shopping. At this time, my mother had to deal with issues that can hardly be described. She had to go shopping for the entire day. My poor wife also had a difficult time. [262] In the Donets Basin (Ukraine), people not only suffered from standing in line, but also had to cope with fecal matter and dirt. The soil was loamy and thus very sticky. And without many paved

streets, carriages and automobiles, driven fast through the muck laden street had no consideration for pedestrians unable to avoid the splash from vehicles. You can imagine the condition of clothes, and the suffering of the people who wore them. For hours, people stood in line wearing inadequate footwear, since there were no gumboots in Russia then. My father spent many years waiting in lines until he just could not do it anymore.

In general, there was no famine. Families who had two or three persons without regular employment could even acquire some wealth. They were able to take turns waiting in line for several hours. Moreover, they could wait in front of different shops. In contrast, families in which both parents had regular jobs, or took care of children at home—they had a very difficult time. Such families might have money to purchase goods, but lacked the opportunity to acquire them. This is why some families lived in want. You couldn't conclude that the living conditions had radically improved. Housing, on the other hand, had improved because many houses had been built, and they were continuing to build more. By law, governmental housing policy guaranteed 9 m² to everyone who had a regular job; unemployed families could only have 4-5 m².

I was good at teaching German to students up to the seventh grade. My students respected me, and the administration of the school reviewed my teaching. I had to walk two kilometers to get to school, one kilometer of that on a well paved street. I also continued to attend adult school. Apart from this, I took a correspondence course in foreign languages at the Moscow Institute for Languages.

I was well prepared for the next school year of 1936/37. At the beginning of the school year, I got two teaching positions at a new school that was recently built teaching students from the fifth to tenth grade. I also received two salaries! The school was big. It had 2,000 students, and 75 teachers. The school was well equipped and declared to be the leading school among 15 schools in its class. Along with this, I taught two evening classes, one class for militiamen, and one for engineers who worked in the coal industry. During these years, it became popular to learn German. Higher educated people were urged to learn German. I worked as much as I could—ten hours a day. In addition, I could only take courses in the evening, or, more precisely, at night. I was full of energy. I was happy that I was allowed to teach and learn, and that I was successful. I was both a good teacher and student. I was able to develop friendships with reputable people, and I had never earned so much money. No one stood in my way. Nothing made me nervous.

[263] My wife, meanwhile, managed to finish a seamstress course. She received many orders. Her customers were a real benefit since she also worked as a shop assistant. It provided my wife with the opportunity to purchase products. In this way, my wife had to do a lot of work since she also did the housework. She had no reason to complain about boredom. What did our son do? The next year, he would attend the first grade. He was a cheerful boy. Indeed, we had many reasons to be happy and content with our situation. We never ceased to thank our Lord. We thanked Him for the events through which He taught us important lessons. We thanked Him for giving us courage, otherwise we would not have been able to survive. We thanked Him for enabling us to embrace the proper view of worldly wellbeing, and having material goods. In this way, we could easily leave our

material goods when forced to by fate. We had already experienced that, and we would experience it again.

The situation of my sisters Tina, Sarah, and Maria, was also better. However, we were very concerned about our father's health. We all gradually became more worried, and more agitated whenever we saw father. His cancer worried us. He tried to reassure us through optimistic statements about his condition. Yet, he also felt differently about it, having given up all hope of recovering. Obviously, we noticed that. Without a doubt, father didn't believe that he would recover anymore. He pretended to be strong to conceal his worsening pain and difficulties from us. He did not want us to be aware of his physical and mental suffering. When we visited him, he would often not lie in bed, and instead walk around his room trying to convey the impression that he was interested in various things. When we left, we always felt sad.

In 1937 Stalin's new Soviet constitution was made public, declaring the victory of the Soviet system. In the same year, films with sound were shown in the Soviet Union for the first time. That was a big event. There was a certain stability in some sectors of the Soviet economy supported by the threatening KGB. In short, people had the misleading impression that the country was making progress. Every day, they heard about it, and of course, they also longed for it. In this way, people gradually were convinced that the country was improving with new endeavors to become stronger, and develop further. The new system faced no obstacles. The Communist Party and KGB had achieved their goal to have people believe that the situation was good, and was improving. People did become more confident in their optimism. This reminds me of the Epistle to the Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

[264] But this was false belief, and spread among the population. The Communists did everything possible to promote it, although the party leadership knew better. At that time, the single political party, with its singular leadership, Stalin, was not ignorant that the general population believed the improvement in the standard of living was only one of Stalin's fixed ideas. He had successfully attended a theological college before becoming a revolutionary, and had learned from the Bible that belief without action is nothing. He also knew that no action could confirm the belief of the Soviet population. Stalin was well informed, so he was well aware that the country suffered from inner unrest even though it appeared calm on the surface.

What could he do about it? After Stalin's new constitution was adopted in 1937, the propaganda publicized Stalin's new "theory." The main argument was that the improvement of the economic situation and intensification of the class struggle must occur at the same time. In other words, Stalin thought that the country's economic improvement would lead to an increase in class struggle because of it. The premise was a lie, and the conclusion was foolish. The propaganda infused Stalin's theory into people's minds to the degree that communists, particularly loyal party members, and the KGB, believed it. This foolish belief was not supported by evidence. No class existed in this country that was able to resist the system. Nonetheless, that resistant class had to be found despite its non-existence just because Stalin wanted it. In 1937, the search for the "enemy class" began.

My brother-in-law, Hans Neufeld, Maria's husband, fell victim to this search. Later, Maria was "found" too. Every day more and more people fell prey to this terror. They found these "enemies of the people" in all layers of the population. They were doctors, engineers, teachers, bureaucrats, workers, and so forth. Farmers, especially, were often among these made-up enemies. This artificially created wave of terror continued until about the end of 1938. Thousands of innocent people were separated from their families and deported to the north or the eastern parts of the Soviet Union, and never returned. They did not have fair trials. Instead, special three-person tribunals would put their names on the list of people to be banned. Only at night, the KGB came to pick up their city-dwelling victims. After this, the victims were divided up, and deported. In the countryside, the KGB arrested their victims while they were on the street, or at work. They were deported without warning, so they weren't wearing clothes suitable for travel, and they didn't have food for the journey. In addition, they didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to their families. In the village, the workers ran when they caught sight of the "black ravens" on the street. The KGB couldn't act this way in the cities. [265] But, city dwellers were also terrified by spotting some "black ravens." It didn't matter whether they were at home, at their workbench, in their office, or on an assembly line. The KGB could arrest any man, age 15 or elderly, disabled or able-bodied, healthy or sick. Whenever a man did not return home in the evening, his family began to expect that he would never return. If he was only running late, his family would welcome him home with hugs and tears. Everyone was prepared to fall prey to the "black raven." It might happen today; it might happen tomorrow.

There was no news about where these people were taken. The wave of terror afflicted the entire country, from north to south, from east to west. You never heard about a victim of this terror returning. All these deported people died sooner or later. Eventually we learned that they had been shot.

I and some of my colleagues were spared this terror. I don't know why. Was I more innocent than the thousands of people who had been murdered? Not at all. I often had to ask myself whether someone or something protected me from persecution. Did Colonel Ranovitsch save me? The same man who had kept me in suspense for an entire year? Had his wife and daughter, Schura, reminded him of the mutual trust between us in their conversations with him? I don't know. I only know that no one persecuted me while living in Stalino.

Here is another episode of my life in Stalino. I taught German to a seventh-grade class. At the end of the school year, in the spring of 1936, the Ministry of Education invited me to the city. They had to give their permission to allow me to teach grade ten during the next school year. I was looking forward to this. In the office of the department head, I stood in front of an elderly man with gray hair and glasses sitting behind a desk with a green tablecloth. He somehow impressed me. We greeted each other, and he asked me to take a seat in front of his desk. I sat down and told him my full name as was expected when talking to senior officials. "Toews David Ivanovich." I noticed that the man was attentively looking at me. In the same manner, he then looked at the documents in front of him until he looked up at me again. I was able to bear his serious gaze. However, he said to me in an earnest voice, "Is your father Ivan Petrovich from Marinovka (the official name of

Nordheim)?” I answered his question in the affirmative. Upon this, the elegant man stood up, and gave me his hand so that we shook hands for some time. He spoke to me gently, “You are very welcomed here! I am glad to meet and employ a son of Ivan Petrovich. I suppose that you are his youngest son.” I asked how he knew my father. He told me that he had purchased an edition of the *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*¹ from the teacher Gerhard Neufeld at an auction in 1925 when Neufeld emigrated to Canada. [266] He was proud to still own it since it reminded him of an excellent colleague. He asked me whether I knew Yegor Petrowich. I said no. He smiled, “These days, it is better not to know too much. In particular, a person should not know too much about strangers, especially about foreigners. Indeed, you are supposed to know nothing about them. By the way, you don’t need to be afraid of me. I only have one other question. Could I have seen your father in the city?” I replied, “Yes, he lives here with his daughter, who works at the hospital.” He interrupted me, “Do you mean Yekaterina Ivanovna?” I said, “Yes, you’re right. She has worked there for about 11 years. You also employed two sisters of mine, and my brother-in-law as German teachers.” My interlocutor was surprised by this, “Really? I cannot believe this.” I then reminded him of Maria Ivanovna and Ivan Gerhardovich Neufeld.

He then said in a shy voice, “Yes, I well remember. That man is easy to recognize.” I pointed out, “Indeed, his big eyes stand out.” He continued, “I remember him well. However, I cannot believe that your sisters work as teachers as well.” I responded, “Yes, I also have another sister who lives nearby. You cannot know her. Her name is Alexandra Ivanovna Kasanskaya.” Upon this, the man stood up and blushed. He was very puzzled, “That is a sister of yours, too? I would never have been able to find this out myself.” I then briefly told him about my siblings and our parents.

My employer remembered that he had heard my mother had difficulty walking. He had also learned about what had happened to my parents. Yet, he had never thought he would see our family again, certainly not under these new circumstances, and that my family would live so close to him. He said, “Sometime, I need to look at it myself again.” He then told me his story. “My name is Ivan Alexeyevich Nikitin. Back in the days, I worked as a teacher in the neighbouring village of Seladovka. I went to the auction out of curiosity. Your father was there, too. No one was interested in buying the encyclopedia. Your father then launched a bid to start the auction. When I made an offer, your father let me purchase the book. It was inexpensive. In addition, I also bought a German-Russian dictionary. I began to study both books. In this way, I didn’t only get to know the encyclopedia, but I also gradually learned German. Considering that I need to attend German lessons now, I know that I have really benefitted from my reading.”

My employer then took the necessary steps to approve my new position, and gave me the necessary documents. They confirmed that I was permitted to teach German from the fifth grade to the tenth grade at middle and high schools. After we were done with these things, he pressed a button, and a young woman entered. He invited her to sit at the desk and explained that she was his daughter, Nadyezhda (Nadya) whom he employed as an inspector. He introduced me to his daughter, and said, “One day we will invite this man’s whole family to visit us. They live nearby. You will come too.” [267] He then told his

¹ A widely used German language encyclopedia.

daughter how we knew each other. Moreover, he related what had happened to us since 1925. I thanked him for this friendship between our families that had seemed to emerge. We said goodbye. The last words he spoke were, "How quickly these 11 years have gone by." While returning to the street I thought about how much sympathy this Russian man felt for a despised German family. At the same time, I remembered how my father called on us always to respect people from other nations. Instead of considering nationalities, we should look at people's hearts and minds. But I had another thought that would occupy me for a longer time, and cause me some unrest. It was not the right time to show such friendship in public, although I really enjoyed it, I needed to conceal this friendship. It was dangerous to be open about it. I told my father and my sisters about my incredible encounter with this man who felt a deep friendship with Germans. My father once again confirmed his positive attitude towards all nations.

My sibling and I were pursuing their jobs in peace until my brother-in-law Hans Neufeld and my sister Maria were arrested. This resulted in feeling threatened once again. During the spring of 1937, I once met the daughter of my friend, Nikitin, in a garden across from my school. I could immediately see her anxiety. I asked her whether she did not feel well, and how her father was doing since I hadn't seen him for a while. She started to cry. She was young and melancholic. That moment, I knew what troubled her. I asked her whether she had received any information about her father. She only shook her head. I could see how much pain she suffered. She whispered, "My father did not cause harm to anyone. He suffers now even though he is innocent." I replied, "I am absolutely convinced of his innocence." I wanted to comfort her, but I did not know how. We shook hands and parted. I thought, "Another innocent victim! How many innocent people have to suffer!" I left in great sadness.

Many other innocent people were deported. The following people from Nordheim were deported: my oldest brother, Peter; the brother of our brother-in-law, J. Dicks; Nikolai, Katja's brother; my best friend, Heinrich Bartel; his uncle, Jakob Bartel; my friends, Gerhard Isaak, and Jakob and Peter Dueck; Gerhard and Isbrand Friesen; Peter and Gerhard Hildebrand; Abram and Kornelius Unruh. These elderly men were among them: Peter Voth, Isaak Born, Heinrich Tiessen, Jakob Hamm, Jakob Unruh, Nikolai Neumann, Jakob Rogalsky, Daniel Wiebe, and Peter Kasper. This isn't a complete list of the 25 to 30 people deported from Nordheim, our one, small village. It was terrible.

Later, statisticians discovered that about 20 million people fell prey to the Stalinist terror. There were three waves. The first from 1930 to 1931, the second from 1934 to 1935, and the third and biggest from 1937 to 1938. Families suffered from losing their fathers, sons, and brothers. Other family members also had a difficult time. People felt contempt for them since they considered them as relatives of "enemies of the people." [268] Accordingly, they were badly treated. Such adults were not allowed to vote, in fact, lost all their rights as citizens. The children of "enemies of the people" lost their right to education. They were only permitted to attend village schools. Some relatives of "public enemies" had to accept lower positions, while colleagues scolded and insulted them. Some German female employees were scapegoated until they gave up their resistance, and fulfilled the base desires of their shameless colleagues. Then they had to cope with shame, slander and contempt. It is impossible to describe all the suffering that most German families

experienced at that time. Even though the intensity of terror gradually decreased, injuries continued until Stalin, this villain and sadistic enemy of humankind, died in 1953. Russians are not sure how Stalin eventually died, but you can't completely rule out the possibility that someone "assisted" him. The majority of Soviet citizens think that this was the most reasonable possibility. The Stalinist era ended with his death. I only wonder whether this era has really ended.

In the schoolyear of 1937/38, I was burdened with an incredible amount of work. I had to teach 16 lessons per day. I taught all the German courses for the grade 8 to 10 at three different schools. In addition, I had to walk two hours each day. I first had to walk to the first school. Then I had to walk from one school to another. And lastly, I had to walk three kilometers to return home from that school. Then I only had two 30-minute lunch breaks where I could manage a snack.

At 7 am I was at work, and I had dinner at home at 10 pm. I never missed one lesson, and always arrived on time. Was this necessary? No, I don't think so. But, as already mentioned, some teachers, including German teachers, were arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps. As a result, there was a lack of teachers. In the fall of 1937, most schools had a shortage of teachers for various subjects. Therefore, schools looked for all sorts of strategies to deal with this situation. When I was going to refuse my new workload in the fall of 1937, my new head at the Ministry of Education gave me a serious look. (My friend, Nikitin, wasn't there anymore; the new head was a Stalinist.) He said, "We will pay you the highest possible hourly wage. You will also get some vacation days to compensate you for the vacation days you would have at each school. You will be the best paid teacher in our entire region." Nonetheless, I still objected to the new workload since it could threaten my health. Upon this, he replied, "Do you think that the former teachers who shared the work among themselves are in good health in the place where they have been forced to go? You should be thankful for this offer." His word choice implied that it could happen to me, that I might have to join my poor, innocent colleagues. It is certain that the former would prefer accepting my offer rather than their current situation. Considering this, I gave up my resistance, and promised to do my best to carry the new workload. At that moment, Ranovitsch, his wife, and Schura came into my mind. I wondered whether I would see them again. Had I been wrong about them?

[269] The decision was made. It was absolutely clear to me that they used me as a human guinea pig that school year. They wanted to find out whether a teacher could survive such an excessive workload. After the schedules of the three schools had been adapted to this decision, I immediately started to work. At home, my family enjoyed a good standard of living. We had all the necessities: an apartment, enough fuel, and clothing for the entire year. My wife had to supply us with food and drink. On 1 September the school year started, and exactly followed the new schedule as was agreed. My schedule never changed throughout the school year. As mentioned, I left at 6:30 am, and I returned at 10 pm. From 10 - 11 pm, I had dinner. From 11 pm to 1-2 am, I prepared the lessons for the next school day. On Sunday and my vacation days, I worked on my correspondence course at the Moscow Institute for Languages. To do this excessive amount of work, I needed a lot of discipline, and obviously, a lot of energy as well. Thankfully I had both. The way home after school especially helped me cope with the workload. I could have gone home in 30

or 40 minutes if I used the tram for parts of the way. However, I intentionally did not do that. I always walked home slowly, taking deep breaths. So, I always needed twice the time (80 or 90 minutes). I was relaxed and had a good appetite when arriving home. By doing this, I was able to cope with the workload without losing my mental health. Actually, survival was what I somehow managed. I think I would have been able to do my work, if something terrible hadn't happened.

On a sunny day at the beginning of April, my sister Tina brought our ill father to us. He wanted to die at our house. I had my last examination with a student on 9 June. I had arranged for vacation from 10 June onwards. That was the day my father died. From 10 April to 9 June, the end of the school years, I had managed to do my lessons. My own health had been declining during this time, and I suffered a relapse of my radicular pain. This severe pain was also added to my ongoing suffering. However, I noticed how with great courage my father bore his illness. He did not surrender to his pain until the last attack overcame him. I was eager to follow his example, but didn't always succeed.

After father's funeral in Nordheim, we sat down together to discuss whether we should take a trip to the Caucasus mountains since we needed some rest, considering how many difficulties we had experienced. Finally, we had the trip. We spent about 20 days in the mountains. We then went to Transcaucasia until reaching Baku. After this, we travelled along the border from Sukhumi to Batumi. We eventually arrived in Sochi, Adler Microdistrict, Gelendzhik, and Novorossiysk. The last city we visited was Mariupol on the Sea of Azov¹. We returned home by train. When we were back in our apartment, our bodies were exhausted, but mentally, we felt much better. Indeed, the journey was helpful, and we intended to have more trips in future.

[270] After spending an additional vacation month at home, I had to begin preparing for the 1937/38 school year. In mid-August, I had to attend consultations and conferences. I felt relaxed. I had to lead the department of 20-25 German teachers to implement a new school system that required completely new teaching methods. To adopt these methods, teachers needed to have significantly better language skills. However, they had employed several new educators who faced real challenges when using these new teaching methods. The main difference between the old and new methods was the goal and purpose of language learning. Until then, teachers aimed at providing students with theoretical knowledge about the target language. For instance, teachers practiced grammar with students to enable them to translate German texts, thereby employing various translation techniques. By contrast, the contemporary method wanted to support students in speaking the foreign language. For this reason, teachers needed to teach students how to use the foreign language conversationally. So, teachers primarily had to be able to speak the target language fluently. Most teachers who were not of German descent struggled to do this. It was already plain at the autumn conference of German teachers that we needed to offer the teachers themselves extra lessons to practice speaking. Who would teach these extra lessons? Of course, the teacher Toews would be in charge. You gain much satisfaction from being capable of helping the weak, thus this duty appealed to me. Even though it was on a voluntary basis, I accepted this additional duty. There were frequently engineers who

¹ The list of places is obviously not in the geographical order of travel.

also were interested in practicing conversational German. I had finished my correspondence certificate without difficulty. In so doing, I had learned everything offered at Russian universities about German. At this point, further education had to be on my own. I was hired at the model school of our district. I supervised and controlled the entire German teaching for the tenth grade. The administration of my school, and the Ministry of Education fully trusted me. Likewise, my colleagues respected me. I noticed that my students appreciated my teaching, and me as a person. From a political point of view, the KGB had purged and chastened me; they had weighed me, and had not found me wanting so to speak. I was not engaged in politics at all. I only regularly read the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* to know what was happening in the country in general. We owned a decent, small apartment, but that was fine. We also had a small garden. Most importantly, the apartment was located at the very periphery of the city. We had clean air there. We had a good income because of my salary, and Katja's needlework. As a result, we enjoyed relatively good living conditions. We also had many friends and acquaintances. In addition, my sisters Tina and Sara didn't live too far away from our apartment. Our elderly family member had passed away: my father and my grandmother. Well, they had gone to a place where they would be better treated. My mother sometimes stayed with us, or moved to my sisters' in the city, or went to my sister Liese in the countryside. Finally, there was our son, healthy, growing, and attending grade two without any difficulty.

[271] I want to point out that I had accomplished all possible worldly goals at that time. Not only I, but we all were aware that we were not solely successful because of our hard work, physical effort, and our other abilities. Thousands of our fellow citizens equally had these capacities. In addition to these, we enjoyed something without which it was impossible to be successful, namely the goodwill of the KGB. Why we had received grace from the KGB, an almighty institution in the Soviet Empire, was unknown to us. Yet I was supposed to get the pleasure from knowing the reason for this was when it was revealed.

The school year of 1938/39 was over. Students had finished examinations and received their grades. And I had received my vacation pay. I returned home from school, and while we had tea in the evening, we decided to visit my sisters the next afternoon. Therefore, I would have to go into the city centre tomorrow to purchase some things. The following morning, I took tram number five to get to the district where I wanted to go. To return, I had to again take the tram from the central square. After shopping, I walked back to the tram station. It suddenly brought back all the memories taking this same way involuntarily. It had annoyed me to walk there even then. I recalled how I was forced to walk this way three years ago. I stood at a crossroad. Going to the right, I would pass by the KGB central administration building. On the next corner to the left, there were apartment buildings where I had been forced to visit the Ranovitsch family while clenching my fists. I had always kept them in my pockets so that nobody could see them. A watchman saluted me, and pressed a button. A second watchman appeared to bring me to the apartment door. The button there caused a purring noise, the door would open, and Mrs. Ranovitsch would stand there to lead me to a round table where I waited for varying periods until her daughter appeared for extra German lessons. Imagine how I detested that sort of comedy! I suddenly turned my head the other way, and I just walked straight forward. That did me good. I reached a spot where I could sit down on a bench to wait for tram number five to take me home. Deep in thought, I sat down on a bench absentmindedly. I was not in a hurry, and I

wanted to have a rest. I remembered that last evening with the Ranovitsch family. It crossed my mind that Schura must have graduated from school some days ago. She would be torn over deciding in which school to enroll. Her parents might have decided for her with, or without consulting her. I might have been a little bit absentminded, considering that I had put my bag on my knees, and leaned my head on it.

[272] In any case, I did not know how it could have escaped my attention that someone had positioned himself in front of me. I now heard this person say a low voice while I was half asleep, "Good day, Mr. David Toews." Being startled, I looked up, and I could not believe whom I saw. Schura stood in front of me. "I am sorry that I frightened you." Without being aware of it, I leaped from the bench and reached out my hand to her. We stood still for a few seconds, but she asked me whether she could sit down. I said, "Of course." Schura proceeded to tell me that she had finished school with good grades and had obtained a graduation diploma. I asked her whether she intended to attend medical school. Upon this, she asked me why I was assuming this. I responded, "I really have no idea about your plans, but I think that a medical school would suit you." During our conversation, I referred to her intentionally with a polite formal means of address because she appeared to me to be an adult woman. In addition, we didn't really know each other. Yet Schura was a good observer. She asked me in a humorous and flattering manner: "Why do you refer to me as *Sie* and not *Du*? Are you trying to create distance between us?" I replied, "That is not my intention at all. However, you are now an adult woman, and not my student anymore." She then said that she would have wished that I would have been her teacher for the last three years. I was not sure whether this statement was serious, or contrived. Noticing that I doubted her words, she looked down, and said in a low voice, "I will never forget your perspective on mutual trust." She told me, "I am the only child of my parents. There is a good relationship between me and my parents. At school, I had classmates whose relatives had been arrested. So, I had the impression that my peers didn't really trust me since I was considered to be someone of the KGB. That was always a heavy burden for me. At home, I began to feel that I could not be completely open with my parents. It was different when I was a child. I gradually became aware that my trust in my parents had decreased. It was even more difficult to deal with this than with the mistrust of my peers. As a result, I started to struggle with learning, and lost interest. Then you became my tutor. I noticed that you really trusted me even though my parents treated you with mistrust. Your trust encouraged me to do what I had always wanted to do. Whenever I talked with them about trust, I had the impression that my mother understood me better than my father. My father and I had intense conflicts. I was angry with him, and he was equally angry with me. I stopped going to school. We fought every evening. Whenever my teacher called to ask my mother why I had not been at school, mother said that I had been sick. In this situation, I always shouted at my mother, "You are a liar." At that point in my life, I didn't care about anything, I only wanted to run away. The next day, I again did not go to school. When my father had returned, he became very angry with me, and shouted at me, "What do you want to do?" I then said to him that I would only go to school again under one condition. He had to promise not to arrest you. [273] So he promised, but I told him that I definitely would run away if he deceived me by arresting you." While Schura shared her story with me, I kept silent. After she stopped speaking, I asked, "Would you have really left your parents if they had arrested me." She then bent her head and said in a very low voice, "At the end of the day I didn't have to decide." I apologized for my

question, and thanked her for the trust she had in me. Schura looked across the pleasant square. "I just left that building." She said as she looked at the excellent building of the medical school opposite. "I went there to submit my application documents. I want to study there. I want to become an independent person." I replied that my guess had not been wrong. I also cautioned her that no one could live completely independent of others. By contrast, life would become easier if one is able to rely on other people. Schura looked down the tram line. She said, "Your tram number five is coming. Why have you already let it pass twice?" I replied, "How do you [formal], oh sorry, you [informal] know what tram I have to take?" She responded, "I also know at which school you work. You teach at the big school near the market." We shook our right hands, and wished each other the best for the future. At the same time, we also said thank you to each other. I got on the tram, and stood at the door to wave to her. I said, "Goodbye." I noticed that she was still waving when my tram turned the corner.

Sitting in the tram, I pondered whether the proverb, the apple never falls far from the tree, was entirely accurate. I also thought about a similar Bible quote, A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit (Matthew 7:18). You can find the same idea in Matthew 12:33. According to these statements, the inheritance we observe in the flora and fauna equally applies to humans. In my opinion, this point of view shows a certain degree of ignorance since it neglects education and intelligence with regard to inheritance. Both plants and animals lack these human traits. Apart from this, nowadays, no one would deny the fact that particular conditions and circumstances play an important role in every kind of growing. I was also happy that my time at the Ranovitsch's might not have been entirely pointless. That was incredible! First of all, I was called to help the unhappy child. She recognized that I helped her a little bit, so she supported me. Indeed, she was a gentle child. I hoped she would not change her honest character. Perhaps Schura had only made up the entire story with the parents. Why had she been interested in finding out where I worked? Who knows, maybe she had been observing me for several years. Why did she reach out to me today? Was the story really over? Was something evil behind it? For a moment, I was torn between doubt and trust. Yet she had been so happy about meeting me again. Indeed, Schura had been my guardian angel. For that, I was so glad.

[274] My vacation days were soon over. The beginning of the school year 1939/40 came closer. There were my organizational meetings. We had plenty of plans. Everything was fine and calm. Our material situation was improving despite the fact that the Soviet Union was engaged in two wars, launching a war against Poland, and later against Finland. Nonetheless, the country remained peaceful.

There were also some new developments for my family. My brother Gerhard was released from the deportation camp, and returned home. He got a position as an accountant at the middle school in Ebental. My sister Tina got married. She became Mrs. Sakutka. She left Rutschenkovo-Stalino for Veronezh¹ with her husband. There they both worked as dental technicians and did very well. Sara and my family were the only ones who remained in Rutschenkovo-Stalino.

¹ In 2021 Veronezh, Veronezh Oblast, Russia 51°40'18"N 39°12'38"E, 517 km south of Moscow, 425 km north of Stalino (Donetsk).

The school year began. It went as usual. Yet, there was unrest behind the borders of the Soviet Union. In the west, Germany launched wars against its neighbouring countries. From 1933 onwards, the National Socialist Party under the leadership of Hitler, had governed Germany. In the east, Japan had invaded China to conquer new territories. At this time, we were not affected by these events. Our country was peaceful and seemed to be content. We didn't notice the approaching catastrophe for the entire world. Even treacherous Stalin was sleeping. The school year ended, and I had my annual vacation starting 20 June 1941. That day we did not expect the devastation of our own life, the entire population, and country that would begin on the next day.

The Second World War and Its Repercussions for Us

[275] It was a sunny Sunday on 21 June 1941. Katja and I took a ride to the city. After we were done shopping, we waited at the tram station for our number five line. A loud radio broadcast caught our attention. V. Molotov, the head of the council of ministers, was speaking. We recognized his voice, and paid attention. What was he saying? Did he mention the word war? Yes, indeed, he was talking about a war, a war between Germany and the Soviet Union had broken out. Germany had invaded Russia. Molotov's last words were, "We fight for the right cause. We are going to win this war." Obviously, Germany was conducting a war. However, we wondered why German had launched a war against the Soviet Union. It had not been a long time ago that both empires had concluded a non-aggression pact signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop. Everyone knew what Germany's breach of the contract meant. It was also clear that the Soviet government disliked some Soviet citizens, not only Germans. Some people built their hopes on the war during the initial period. However, other Germans, especially the elderly ones, remembered the imperial policies of 1914 before the beginning of the First World War. Czar Nikolas the Second signed a decree that ordered the exile or resettlement of Germans to Siberia. The revolution made the implementation of this decree impossible. But now, some Russian-Germans began to worry.

On Monday, teachers had to return from their holidays. Radios were rarely switched off. We had to do military exercises every day. School buildings were evacuated to turn them into hospitals. Trenches were built on the streets, and on the school grounds. We dug a trench on the narrow street across from our home. In case of an emergency, women and children could shelter there. According to the governmental order, all men and boys over age 15 were armed with devices to prepare them to put out fires. In general, we had to provide support in any situation. We had to adhere paper strips to the windows of our home to prevent injuries from glass fragments in case of breaking windows. During the night, we had to switch off all lights. Healthy men were gathered to form night brigades for street patrols. There was much to do at home, and at work. My colleague Erwin and I were ordered to participate in organizing the regulation of food supplies. That added to my workload. There was always something else to do. We both were terrified (we were Germans) by the imprisonment of several German men we knew. I remembered Ranovitsch again. It was not surprising that the Germans would get in trouble, if Germany conducted a war against Russia. In this way, I had to think about Schura again. Would she continue

to defend her agreement with her father under the present circumstances? [250] I somehow felt sorry for her, although I wished her all the best from the bottom of my heart. Indeed, I wished her luck for my own sake. I soon realized that my wishes were self-centered. I abandoned this topic, and I left my fate to a higher being who had taken good care of me for the entire time. He might have used Schura as an instrument to realize His will. He would continue to take care of me. You are supposed to have confidence in Him. Here again, the question of trust crossed my mind. Had I not spoken about trust some time ago, when sitting at the round table. These thoughts calmed me down. I was ordered to go to the committee for military service. They put my name, and my colleague Erwin Steinke's name on a list. An inner voice spoke to me, "Beware of the sword of Damocles."

In the meantime, we heard in the news told of the brutal battles at the front. We learned that the German army made progress in Russia. We transformed some other buildings into schools since the school year would soon begin. We, Steinke and I, were frequently called to the committee for military service, but they always returned our personal documents to us. I explained the committee's respectful behaviour towards us by my personal acquaintance with the colonel Kelentschi who had once attended one of my German classes. Each time, after the colonel had had my conscription documents in his hand, and had made some notes on his list, he handed them back to me, and told me, "Go home," in German. "Thank you," I replied, and ran home to soothe my wife as quickly as possible. They treated my colleague the same way. We knew each other's families since Steinke lived across the street. We were also aware that the Mrs. Steinke would soon give birth to a child. In fact, we pitied her.

My wife and I discussed whether she should visit her parents to pick up our son, who had spent his summer break in the countryside with his grandparents. She left on 25 or 26 August. Something bad happened during this time. On 31 August, I was sitting near the closed window shutter preparing for my lessons. I thought to myself, "The new school year will start tomorrow." Between 12 and 1 in the morning, I heard an airplane above us. A thundering roar began. I noticed two, three, four detonations. I ran outside into the yard. I saw another airplane in the moonlight that flew the same way as the previous one. Our city was being bombed for the first time. The bombs were targeted on the city centre, and the steel factory. They caused much damage. In the morning, someone knocked on my door before I left for school. When opening the door, the postman stood in front of me. He asked me what my family name was. He handed me an order to come to the committee for military service. I thought to myself, "This is the last invitation." I had prepared my backpack for this long ago. Looking through the window, I saw that the postman also left Steinke's yard. We both met in front of Colonel Kelentschi's desk. When I gave my documents to him, he looked seriously at me.[277] He put my document aside and noted something on his list. After this, he spoke to me in German, "Now, it is time for you." He continued in Russian, "Today, you need to go to the muster point at the main station. Please take your passport and backpack with you." The lot now had fallen on me. Steinke stood behind me. He asked the colonel not to conscript him since his wife was expecting a child. The colonel returned his documents to him without saying anything. He only gave him a very worried look. On our way home, my colleague wondered what the colonel's long stare could have meant. I replied, "Oh, our colonel might have thought it important for us friends to go to war together." Steinke affirmed my assertion, but he drew attention to his pregnant

wife. I replied to him, "I know." We then said goodbye to each other. While shaking our hands, we both said, "We might see each other again. Farewell!" Both of us went home, he to his family, while I returned to an empty house since my wife and my son had not yet arrived. Their train was scheduled to arrive at the main station at 4 pm. I felt upset and asked myself again and again, "Will Katja and Reinhard arrive before my train leaves? God only knows where the train will take me."

My backpack was ready, and now I added envelopes, empty postcards, ink, a pen holder (we did not have pens back then), and several pencils. I also added some food, some towels and handkerchiefs. I put the following items into my side pocket: a fork, a knife, a spoon, salt, yarn, some buttons, some needles, and so forth. In my jacket pocket, I had a wallet and a pocket atlas. I had written on the first empty page of the pocket atlas my personal information and my address. I had adhered photos of my small mother who had walking difficulties, of my wife, of our son, and one of myself to the inside cover of the book. I also brought my pocketknife with me, and I put on my wristwatch. Then I sat down to write a letter to my wife and son. I put the letter in an empty spot next to the table lamp. I ate something, then knelt down. My dear Reader! I think you can imagine the content of my farewell prayer. You know what I asked Him for, and the worries I shared with Him. I believe you will have no trouble figuring that out.

The clock showed that it was 2 pm. I needed thirty minutes to get to the main station. I closed the front door and went to my neighbour's. They were nice people. His name was Aschvaskich, his wife's name was Evdokiya, and his daughter's, Maruya. We said goodbye to each other in a manner appropriate to siblings. He could not accompany me to the train station since his legs had been injured. I gave him the key to my home, and left it behind. At the main station, I waited for two trains: the train on which my wife and my son were going to return, and the train which would take me away. My wife and son arrived a little bit early, so we had thirty minutes to say goodbye. [278] When my train arrived, I had to stay in a roofless rail car until we got to the central station in the city, so we waved at each other for a long time since the tracks ran straight. Then we lost sight of each other and I wondered whether we would see each other again. And if so, when? The train passed the steel factory. We saw where the explosions had occurred last night. However, we did not see the city centre. That same night, we were loaded on still other roofless rail cars. Our travel continued. We could only see where we were going by looking at the names of the stations as we passed. We were going west.

Let us now return to our city for a little bit. Later when we met again, my wife told me that my friend and colleague Steinke got arrested the next morning, 2 September. Looking through the window, she had noticed that the black raven was in front of Steinke's home. They led him out, and put him into the car. The car then stopped at our house. Two militiamen entered and asked for me. My wife explained in detail that she had said goodbye to me, and that I had left yesterday. With this, the militiamen moved on. They had also arrested some other men who lived on another street. Katja then dressed, and went to the office of the committee for military service, where colonel Kelentschki welcomed her. She asked him what to do next. He then looked at her and asked whether she knew what had happened to my colleague. Upon this, he replied that her husband had a better fate. He wrote and gave an official document to her that verified that she was the wife of a mobilized

soldier. According to this, the administration had to take special care of her with regard to food supplies. However, this document was only valid for a short term. When the Germans were later deported, no one cared about it. I never got to know what had happened to my colleague Steinke. His family was among the Germans who were deported. I don't know where they were deported, or whether the family members survived or perished in their deportation. After hearing my wife's account, I thought that I had reason to believe that a guardian angel protected me, or to be more precise, my entire family, but I don't know who this angel was. In any case, survival in a camp ran by the KGB was unlikely. That was the main issue.

On 5 September, my train went to the triangle formed by the cities of Nizhyn¹, Piryatyn², and Kyiv until we arrived in Kyiv. At that time, the German Wehrmacht had surrounded half of the city. Apart from this, a web of barrage balloons surrounded the city. There were many signs that the city would soon be captured. What would happen to us, roughly 4,000 men, after we were put into this sack? One day later, on 6 September, we wanted to turn to our colonel to ask him about his plans, but we couldn't find him. During this time, we were camped in an open field while heavy rain fell. [279] Since they were afraid in the besieged city, all the officers had run away taking all our documents with them. We had been abandoned. No one was interested in us. We could only take shelter in front of piles of rye sheaves still in the field. The rye had grown well, and the sheaves were tall. Five to ten deserted men or boys could sit under a single pile. We were advised by the city to send one member of our ten-person group to purchase bread in the city. I was also in charge of one group. Two bombers greeted us when 300-400 of our group leaders waited in front of a bread shop. The bombers released seven or eight bombs close by. People were killed and injured. You could hear the whining and groaning. I had thrown myself head first into one of the first bomb craters. I hoped that it was unlikely that a second bomb could hit again. I was lucky. Splinters whirled above me and I was partially covered by earth. Several dead bodies and injured men lay around me, but some corpsmen had already arrived. Those of us who remained unhurt did like the hare in the ditty "As the Moon Was Shining Bright." After pulling ourselves up and realizing that we were really still alive, we simply ran. We hurried to the rye field where our friends were waiting for us. From their side, they had witnessed the bombing, and now were eager to learn who had not survived. Obviously, we had no bread with us. We now knew that each person had to decide for himself what to do next. While we lay under the piles to protect us from the rain and discussed with each other, some planes approached flying low at high speed. They did not release bombs.

A crowd came streaming from the city across fields, roads, and puddles. When this chaotic mass came nearer, we saw that it consisted of armed men, unarmed women, and children tagging along, or being carried by the women. We soldiers disappeared into this crowd. Men and soldiers complained, cursed, keeping silent, or prayed, whereas the women were wailing, complaining, and praying. The children cried and shouted. It was terrible to both see and hear this crowd. I became part of a little group with Peter Janzen, one of my colleagues from Stalino-Petrovka, and a boy whose name we never did know. We did not

¹ 51°02'17"N 31°53'10"E

² 50°15'N 32°32'E

consider him to be German. We were all speaking Russian. The boy wanted to stay with us. Where were we supposed to go? In any case, we had to leave the urban triangle. There was a town called Pryluky¹ located between Nizhyn and Pyryatyn. Pryluky was about 80 kilometres away from our current location. We headed toward this town.

[280] We had keep moving while it rained, and the ground was full of mud since it was clear that everyone knew that blood would be shed in this urban triangle that day, and the next. Everyone ran for their lives. The area became more and more open. We sometimes just walked, but we also ran. We walked without ease or rest. We got to Pryluk at night. We had walked 70 or 80 kilometres. No one welcomed us, or paid us any attention, and no one questioned us. Everyone was preoccupied with their many troubles. The last food supplies were distributed and consumed. Where should we go now? We were not allowed to stay in the town. Those who were able moved on. Listening to the public loudspeaker, we frequently heard the order, "Leave this town. Go to the east." Consequently, we had to continue our march. We headed to Poltava² that was hundreds of kilometres away. Could we take the train? No, that was impossible. Bombers attacked every train that moved. We had to walk. What about food? There was only one way. We had to by-pass the villages since you could always get something to eat and to drink at farms. Neither would there be as many soldiers. We crossed many forests and fields. After passing the first forest, my buddy suddenly stood still, and said in perfect German, "That is enough. I do not walk any further. I will stay here. This is my home area. They deported my father from here. We lost everything! We had to hide. I worked in Stalino. I know this area. I want to become a German war prisoner. Listening to you, I think that you want to return to your own homes and families. But if you want, you can stay with me." Peter Janzen and I looked at each other. We were surprised by the decision of our companion. We both said to him, "That is fine. Try your luck." We shook hands with this boy, and then moved on. And on. On 9 September, we arrived in Poltava. We learned from the public loudspeaker that Kyiv had been lost. We had to move on. We got some rest on a bench at the central station of Poltava. We went to the cargo trains to find out whether one of the trains was heading towards Stalino. Indeed, we had luck. There was a train with empty cars for coal that would go to Cmalino [?] at night without making a layover. That was written on the cars with chalk. We climbed into one of the cars. The train left the station after dark. Looking at the names of the stations that the train passed by, we were reassured that the train was heading towards Stalino. That helped us relax. On the way, another man climbed into the back of the car. We could not see him, and could not identify him. In fact, we did not much care about him. In the very early morning, we arrived at our station. Janzen had to go further to get to Stalino. The other man and I climbed out of the car. While doing this, we looked at each other. I recognized that the man was Jakob Doerksen from Ebental³. He was a former schoolmate of mine. Before sunrise we had reached Ebental. Here, we said goodbye to each other. Indeed, we had both had left Kyiv similarly without being aware of it. He also

¹ 50°35'21"N 32°23'08"E

² 49°35'22"N 34°33'05"E about 180km from Pryluk.

³ Ebental (Mykolaivka in 2021)

wanted to return to his family. Now he was there, whereas I had to move on. I still had to walk three kilometres, but that was nothing.¹

[281] I discussed with my wife what to do next. We could hide until the German army arrived, and then immigrate to Germany. Indeed, this plan might have worked. On the farmyard, there was already a bomb shelter dug beneath an overgrown shrub. I lived there for one month without being noticed by anyone in the village. All three of us could live there for a month or longer as well. My parents-in-law would leave us with sufficient food provisions. Indeed, this plan could have worked out. In doing so, we could have finally escaped the KGB and the shackles of the communist cannibals. After arriving in Germany, we would be able to make it to Canada. Here, the promise that we once heard in a song would come true, “We are both young and beautiful, and we are still able to be happy.” The question was, would we have really been happy? Would we have ever seen our old parents other than in our dreams? Maybe, they were hungry or freezing. Could we have lived peacefully in this situation while enjoying a good life in Germany or Canada while they suffered in Siberia? Would we have been able to eat, sleep, or attend church in peace with ourselves? We were not even able to help them now while making our plans. Otherwise, we would have been risking someone noticing and informing the police out of envy or for other reasons. But what would happen to us if we decided to stay? Coming to any another decision would have been cruel, selfish, and very egocentric. Had we not experienced much luck during our life? Had we not enjoyed protection against the most severe dangers? Had we not made many promises after overcoming those dangers? Should we have broken our promises because of the first hardship? Should we have given up everything we had achieved?

No, we could not and would not do that. No way! We both said that. We had resisted the temptation. Being in our dugout, we knelt down and thanked God for the power of resistance that He had bestowed upon us, and we prayed for the future of our family. We left the bomb shelter and tightened our belts. For a moment, our parents looked at us but said nothing. They understood what had happened, and they trusted us. My father only said that everyone knew that Tina was here. However, considering my story, would they not arrest me? I replied that I could not overcome myself. At night, I went to my mother and my sister Liese. My mother asked me whether I was afraid. I answered, “I think we are all equally scared.” On the next day, the soldiers and collective workers (mostly Russians), began to drive the families and their belongings toward the train station at Zhelanaya. That took an entire day and night. There were many freight cars on a siding far away from the main station. They loaded 60 to 70 persons with their belongings into the wagons. In fact, we had to climb into them. On this occasion, I again met my former schoolmate, Jakob Doerksen, with whom I had gone from Poltava to our station during the night.

Seeing the German villages was terrifying. The cattle walked freely on the street and crying out in thirst. The cows bleated to be milked. The dogs dragged large pieces of meat with them since the only the best pieces of meat had been cooked and roasted for travel. You could see the herds roaming through the wheat fields—cows, calves, pigs, and baby

¹ David headed to Nordheim, not Stalino.

pigs. House doors hung open. Basements, chambers, and barns, too. In fact, everything was open.

A Devastated Land

[282] Our train moved eastward. Our villagers had now lost their houses. They weren't even able to close their own doors—anyone could go in.

In later years, eyewitnesses told the former inhabitants what had happened when the local population learned that the train had actually left. With cars and carriages, in their hands, and on their shoulders, they had carried away all the property that the Germans had left behind. There were many fights and brawls among the thieves! You don't need much of an imagination to conceive what had happened. By the end of October, some parts, even entire villages had been burned down when young people had returned from Kyiv like I had. Bombing did not cause this; the houses had simply been burned down for fun. Afterwards, when the German army had retreated, refugees settled in the houses that remained. They destroyed all gardens that were attached to private houses, or planted by the kolkhoz. They removed trees with tractors and oxen and burned them. Not even one pillar was to be a memory of the former glory. Nothing should be left as a reminder of the Germans. That was the communists' drive of destruction. My wife visited the villages in 1952-1953 but she sometimes struggled to orient herself in the villages because of all the demolished houses. In 1954, I visited Stalino that had, by then, been renamed Donetsk, and met my former neighbours, Rschawskich and his wife Yevdokiya. They told me about the events that had happened after my wife had been there for the last time. Obviously, they had taken all our property but I was very depressed when I learned what had happened to my library. When the Germans occupied the city, no one cared about the books, and they remained unharmed. However, after German retreat, people started to panic. What would happen to them if the Russian administration would fine them with a German library? So, they burned all the books. It took several days and nights since they did not burn well, and there were hundreds of books. They finally had to take the books to a field and pour lamp oil on them to get them to burn. It took me a lot of effort and much expense to collect those books. In remembering my beautiful collection, I want to list the books I still remember: a voluminous world history in six volumes (20x25 cm); Humanity and the Cosmos in 12-16 volumes (20x25 cm); Man and The Earth in six volumes (20x25 cm); Brehm's Animal Life in two volumes (20x25 cm); the collected works of Goethe, Schiller, Wieland, Herder, Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Hebbel, Körner, Franz Reuter, and many other writers. [293] How many single volumes I had! Oh, dear! I possessed books about history and religion, language and songs, poems and poetry, natural history and geography, discoveries and inventions, campaigns and many other topics. They burned all these valuable books in fear of their own countrymen. Oh dear, Russia. You are rich, but your citizens are so poor.

Meanwhile, our train slowly went east. The train often stopped in the open field because they were afraid that people would run away into the towns, even though soldiers escorted the train. In this way, the entire German speaking population of European Russia left their home with tears in their eyes, and grief filling their hearts. Some people still inwardly

hoped that they would return home. But this hope turned out to be futile with their deportation to Siberia's snow drifts, to the Kazakh steppe, to the forests of the Russian taiga, to the plains of the Altai, to the Ural Mountains, to the swamps of Ivdel and Tagi, to the north and to the east. Some even ended up in the camps of the Gulag Archipelago. The Germans had lost their home forever.

The first days of deportation were weary and complicated. The trains were overloaded with goods, munitions and troops. Hostile airplanes attacked stations and trains. Railways were demolished. Sometimes, we needed to backtrack to detour. On the track between Millerovo and Penza, we were surprised by an airstrike that resulted in 30 deaths, and many injuries. They somehow buried the dead in the bomb craters. We did not know where they brought the wounded. (Some of those found their relatives after many months or even years. My brother Gerhard's Adelbert found his family about a year later. He was ten years old when shrapnel had hit his waist.) Six cars were completely destroyed. Their contents were scattered over a big radius—in chaos, broken, torn apart, rendered useless, and spoiled. The next station was close by. There they dragged the train to a rail siding where they reconstituted the train, replacing the demolished carriages. They loaded us and our belongings again, and the journey continued.

Despite all the obstacles we continued to move east. We came to the city of Kuybyshev, on the Volga. As the saying goes, we would make it through the crisis eventually. I stood in the freight yard having climbed out of the railway car to stretch my legs. I looked up, and who did I see there but Stanislaw, my sister Sarah's son. After a warm greeting, he led me to his railway car in a train close to ours. There I saw my sister Sara with her daughter, Brunhilde, and my colleagues from Stalino. I met the Janzen family, the Steinke family, and other acquaintances. There was a signal that their train was about to leave the station. My nephew Stanislaw climbed into the railway carriage, and they disappeared. Much later, long after my sister Sarah, and her daughter Brunhilde had been buried in the cold soil we learned where they had gone. My nephew Stanislaw was the sole survivor.

After returning to the train from seeing my sister Sarah, it immediately departed. A few minutes later, the only sound was the monotonous rattling of wheels, and the rhythmic strokes of the wheels rolling over the joints of the tracks. [284]. We kept silent for a while. Someone finally asked where we were going—I cannot count how often I heard this question. However, no one knew how to reply. The only thing we knew was that we were going further east.

We passed bridges over the Volga. This began the even more difficult second stage of our suffering. The conductor wanted to calm us down by his reassurance that we had passed the most dangerous section of track. However, when learning that we would have fewer stops, we knew what this would potentially mean for us. Most occupants became fearful, and their worries proved to be justified. There were many unexpected and indescribable situations to overcome. We did not have enough water. It became impossible to get a warm meal because the train was moving on without taking any stops. For the occupants, it became very difficult to relieve themselves. There was unrest, tears and despair since the people had to sit or lie down on the goods that covered the entire interior of the railway

car. One person sat close to the next without being able to relieve themselves for several hours, if not days.

Behind the Ural Mountains in the Asian part of Russia, it already is cold in October. Some persons, especially the elderly among us, were freezing, although they sat or lay covered in blankets on top of the stuff. It was impossible to move in the railway car. The air became worse because of various unpleasant smells. Every day and every night, elderly people, adults and children breathed in air full of the foulness of their own excrement, and those of the others. For some of us, it was impossible to stay healthy in this atmosphere. We were hardly able to help the ones who became sick. Also, the dead had to remain in the railway car for a long time. Whenever the train stopped for some minutes, we would remove dead bodies from the car without burying them. There was no lighting until we had the idea to carve out a potato, and to put some fat and a wick in it so that we could light the wick. But that caused smoke that we also had to breathe. It is easy to imagine how a face looks after exposure to such smoke. Yet, we ceased to care about how we looked. At first, our faces and our hands got gray because of soot. Later, they turned dark until they became black. There was no way to wash. We did not have enough water, and we also had barely any change of clothes.

The Asiatic part of Russia is immense, large, and wide. It is hardly possible to measure the length of its roads. Likewise, it is difficult to know how long it takes to pass them. We Germans who were on the train needed to travel for thousands of kilometres until we reached our final destination. We assumed that we would turn towards Central Asia, and felt relieved after turning to the right when passing Novosibirsk. Here it would be warmer. Everyone knows that you need fewer warm clothes, less food and less fuel if you live in a warmer region. Life is easier there than in cold regions. But again, our hopes were dashed. We met people who came from the south. They were on trains loaded with human cargo, like us. They told us that that Central Asia was crowded with Jews. [285] The Jews had to pay a very high price for food because they possessed money. They had arrived there from Europe a long time ago. Central Asia was not accepting refugees anymore. We needed to travel back. Where would we go? It took one week more until we got to Tatarsk, thereby passing Kargat and Barabinsk. From Tatarsk, we went to Kulunda, thereby passing Kupino, Karasuk, and Slavgorod. At each station some railway carriages were uncoupled from the train until the train had been totally dismantled.

On November 12, our railway car was uncoupled in Slavgorod¹. This didn't happen at the station but on an open field two kilometres away from the city. Here, our travel should have come to an end. Now some orders were announced, "Exit the train, and unload it." At first, the people exited the railway cars. They were immediately exposed to the blanketing snow. The snow cover was 15-20 cm thick. At the same time, big snowflakes were falling. We did not know where we were or which station was close. However, we soon found out. Along the rail track, you could see how many small bunches of people emerged. The group stood close to one another next to their belongings. It was cold, and it was snowing all the time. An engine took the railway cars to the station, but we were left in the middle of a field covered with snow. The people started to search for wood, or picked up coal pieces

¹ In 2021 Slavgorod, Altai Krai, Russia, 52°59'N 78°40'E

from the railway tracks. They made bonfires and seated the elderly close to the fire to warm up a little bit. Next, the children were brought to the fire before walking around or sitting covered in blankets. At the same time, we melted snow to get water to wash the elderly people and children a little bit. The adults washed themselves with snow. They then had warm tea. What had to be done? Where to begin? The air was full of snow. You could only see snow. There were no houses.

The people talked with each other asking the same question, “What will happen next?” The answer to this question was, “Wait. We will see.” In fact, no one knew the answer to this question. I could hear some people were quietly singing *When the Tempests of Life Are Raging*. Other groups were singing *When Clouds Darkened the Sky, Throw Away Pain and Sorrow*. If my mother had not been so cold, she would have sung, “Even though the winter threatens with bad weather, bringing ice and snow, spring will eventually come. And although fog is thickening, hiding the sun from our vision, the sunlight will one day awaken the earth in happiness. So, be content and calm, my heart, even though you are freezing. The whole world has been promised a joyous May Day to come.” “For whom?” I wondered. Right now, my mother sat in silence. She looked like the picture of misery. However, it seemed that the sky pitied us. It ceased snowing, and it brightened a little. We caught sight of the contours of some houses. Then we saw some vehicles, or to be more precise, sleighs approaching. They stopped, and someone shouted, “Who wants to come with us? Climb into my sleigh! I can transport two or three families.” You also heard a Russian voice uttering, “I also can take some families.” A third man said, “I need a blacksmith. Is someone a smith?” I then heard a loud voice. The man stood in his sleigh and shouted, “Is there a woodworker here? I need a woodworker.” I shouted back to him, “I am a woodworker.” The man came close and asked, “What is your family name?” I answered, “We are the Toews.” He then answered, “Then I can speak Plautdietsch to you. My name is Klossi. I am the chairman of the collective farm. [286] Our village is called Wiesenfeld. It is not far away from Slavgorod. Who belongs to your family?”

I introduced him to my parents-in-law, my mother, my sister Liese with her children and my wife. The man had come with several sleighs, and so several families were loaded. We went away at a walking speed since the horses harnessed to the carriages were in rough shape. We went to Wiesenfeld, or Stepnoje¹ as the village was called in Russian. Here we would find accommodation. Would this village also become our new home? Surely our deportation from our homeland in Ukraine to Siberia was concluded. The Communist government of Russia had killed the Russian Czar because of his crimes against the population. This belief was and is still propagated by the Communists. However, the Communists now had carried out the Czarist plan to deport the Germans to Siberia. First, the founders of the Communist Party had prevented the order from being implemented due to the October revolution. Now the successors of the Czar had executed the Czarist order. Nonetheless, they claimed that they pursued a Leninist agenda. That was utter cynicism! They had committed an atrocity.

When my protector learned that I was also a teacher, that meant he would drive us to the school as well. The school lacked a janitor, and there was one empty classroom where

¹ Stepnoye Ozero in 2021, Altai Krai (52°49'55"N 79°52'24"E)

we could live. Considering that I was a woodworker, I would also have additional responsibilities. Time would show how things would work out for us. We arrived at our village of Stepnoje. The members of my family looked at each other, but were silent. We turned into a street. We only could recognize that this was street because people were moving on a road covered by fresh, loose snow. It seemed that the man had been able to read our minds. He said to us that this village only had one building with a roof, namely the school. The roofs of other building had been gradually removed in order to use the wood to repair houses. As a result of this, the buildings looked very poor. In fact, they looked like earth huts. When covered by snow like they were now, you soon would not even be able to see them. I thought about with what kind of timber there would be for me to work with. What could I produce with such timber? A “hopeful” occupation awaited me.

It was already getting dark when we stopped at the schoolyard. A young man came out, and politely greeted us. Our driver introduced us to him, “This is the teacher for our village. His name is Ivan Ivanovich.” Shifting his gaze to us, he said, “This is David Ivanovich and Ikaterina Petrovna. They will live in the empty classroom.”

Our few belongings were brought to the classroom, a narrow, long room. We felt a draft of warm air. That meant a lot to us. The young man received us in a very friendly manner, and immediately offered us warm tea. That was what we needed the most. We became more talkative, and the teacher’s volubility allowed us to quickly get to know each other. [288] Our mood soon improved with the warm air and tea. We especially felt relief—our exhausting journey was over. We spread the few bed clothes we had on the wooden planks, and laid down. Our son lay between us, and we soon fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, we visited our relatives and acquaintances. They had found accommodation on the ranches run by the kolkhoz. The farmstead was about one kilometres from the village located in an open field. The rooms were fine, but cold. They were told that find plenty of fuel could be found near the farm. It would be an easy task to access this valuable resource. They only had to go to the field where they could gather wormwood¹ stems. There was more than enough of it on the field for the entire winter. It was very easy to get. The wormwood was as tall as a man, and the stems were as thick as a thumb. It stood there like a forest, and had become dry and hard. Nonetheless, there were some obstacles to gathering it. First of all, the wormwood was covered by a lot of snow that reached the knees. Secondly, it is hard to imagine how many gloves were ruined when picking the harsh and sharp wormwood stems. Thirdly, you needed a lot of energy to transport a bunch of wormwood stems for 400-500 metres on your back while walking in thick snow. Fourthly, you had to swallow a lot of acrid dust when gathering and burning the wormwood stems. Last but not least, wolves hid in the deep wormwood jungle, so it was dangerous to do it alone. Other than these obstacles, it was easy to get fuel. You didn’t even need cash to pay for it. However, children and elderly people could not dare to go into this jungle, while the women (there were no men with them) had already started to work for the kolkhoz three or four days after their arrival. In fact, the women were forced to earn money. It is too much to ask me to accurately describe the lives of the women, the elderly, and the children. The situation was terrible and heartbreaking. Just imagine how strong

¹ Probably some species of *Artemisia*. David uses the term *Wermut*.

these working women had to be. They worked for the kolkhoz from morning to evening. They had to take care of the cattle, and take cattle feed from the field. In addition, they had to clean the grain for sowing. All this was done during winter, in minus 30°-50°C—without proper clothes. When were they supposed to gather the fuel? They could only do this in the evening or at night. They formed groups to look after themselves. Fuel had to be stored in case of a storm, and if there was a snowstorm, they couldn't even go outside. If they did, it was to get lost, and to freeze to death. Unfortunately, sometimes this did happen. Their situation was even worse come February and March. Girls from 16 years and up, and childless women had to join the Labour Army.

My wife had to work as janitor for the school building, while I had to work at the workshop. This arrangement lasted for two weeks. Then along with lots of young men I had to join the Labour Army. We were sent to the Siberian taiga. I could work at a workshop since I was knowledgeable in technical drawing and planning. By contrast, the other men had to work in the forest. Some of them perished because of the hard work and the poor diet. It is a demanding job to cut down timber in the taiga. During the war, they really needed some intelligent people. [289] At that time, teachers weren't needed, but people who knew a trade and construction were. Such people would always quickly find themselves in a more "comfortable" position. My skills have always helped me in the course of my life, and to be frank, they actually saved my life. The helpfulness of my skills became evident when our section of the Labour Army was sent to a bridge construction site. They were building a railway bridge over the Chumysh¹ river that was 200 kilometres from Barnaul. It was a cruel for the ordinary workers. They were only equipped with spades, axes, and handcarts. During the war, most ordinary workers were soon "finished" with their work on a diet of one small piece of bread and thin soup. The intellectual workers and craftsmen did better because they were less physically exhausted.

In spring, we went to the location where the bridge was built. We came from the Russian taiga where we had spent winter 1940-1941 in the forest. There we had prepared 10,000 square metres of wood and brought it to the river for transport. Bridge construction is a very specific and interesting form of architecture. As I mentioned, I was knowledgeable in technical drawing, and drawing construction plans. My skill in Russian and my pronunciation were very good too, especially considering that the Volga Germans and the Germans in Siberia did not speak Russian well. I soon developed good relationships with the building authorities and engineers. They asked me to establish a night brigade. That was grist for my mill.

The main reason why the serving men of the Labour Army had an unbearable time during the war was the lack of food. On top of that, they obtained even less food when they didn't fulfill their ordered work quota. A worker who became weaker, and did not manage to fulfill the work quota increasingly got less food. As a result, he became even weaker until, at some point, he starved to death. To maintain physical wellbeing, you had to search and find additional food sources. You could not do this in the daytime. Each time a working group (a so-called brigade) started their work, the supervisors checked attendance with a list. The supervisor monitored the workers during the day. Therefore, it was not even

¹ Reka Chumysh, Kemerovo Oblast. About 500 km east of Slavgorod.

possible to leave your brigade for one hour so that you could go into the nearby forest to gather some berries. As a matter of fact, many berries did grow in the Siberian forests and meadows. You could even find many in the swamps.

At night the brigades had better work conditions, and better access to food. The night brigade got a simplified work plan. However, they had the same amount of work to do, and they also had to complete tasks that needed the supervision of highly qualified craftsmen or engineers. As the leader of the brigade, I had to work together with them. Continuous supervision to control each worker wasn't needed. This situation had many advantages. First of all, the night brigade workers were free during the daytime. Secondly, they could do little jobs for the people in the nearby villages. [289] For instance, you could repair a door, install a window or hallway, dig a cellar or even a well, or you could renovate some pieces of furniture, or produce a box, or dig an outside toilet. There was a lot of work for local families who had no males. You could even send one or two workers to the nearby village at night. For these workers, you would get some extra food, or locals would invite you to eat with them. The farmers always had some potatoes, groats, flour, milk, salt and eggs. They sometimes even had meat. Besides this, the night brigade workers could go to the forest to gather berries during the daytime. We had the possibility of giving extra food to a worker from a different brigade who was especially badly off. In this way, we remained physically strong. As a result, we were able to fulfill or even surpass the work quota. That was very beneficial for us. That meant we would receive an extra ration of bread (100 or 200 grams) for our additional work. The engineers and craftsmen decided how many men were necessary to fulfil the work quota at night. It only mattered that we worked on time, and that we even surpassed the work quota. Anyone who was able to produce some commodity (for example, shoes, desks, or hardware) improved his living conditions. He was able to gain some trust, and extra jobs from our masters, supervisors or other persons with whom he had something to do. In this way, our situation became bearable. I have to admit that I often managed to gain the favour of supervisors. That helped me to make it through some very tough situations. I often felt thankful.

When I worked at the bridge construction site, I received a letter from my wife. She informed me that she was expecting a child. Our first son had been born in 1931 in the Caucasus. It would be eleven years until we had another child. (Those first years in the Caucasus were pretty difficult. My wife was not in good physical shape, and the doctors were unable to help her. They had not given us any hope, so accepted that my wife could not have another child. When my wife consulted a gynecologist, he thought that the new climate might help her.) I had mixed feeling about this unexpected news. At the same time, I was both happy and worried. Was it good to have another child in Siberia? My wife could do nothing but wait. She had to be patient. However, we would witness again that our fate was determined by the will of a supreme being. We only needed to have faith.

The fact that my wife was pregnant, and would give birth was the main reason she had not been forced to join the Labour Army. Consequently, she was able to stay with her elderly parents, being the only one left to support them. Yet another unfortunate event happened at this time.

My wife's sister-in-law was arrested. Her husband was Katja's brother, and my best friend. He had been a victim of the Stalinist terror in 1938. They had three children. Katja's brother had been arrested, and went to prison for five years. His children were brought to their grandparents, that is Katja's parents. The family now consisted of two elderly persons, five children, and my wife, who had to support this family. The oldest child was ten years old, and the youngest child would soon be born. Then my wife would need to take care of eight persons, while at the same time doing her work. In addition, our entire construction unit was going to leave the Russian Altai to move to Tula, a town located a little south of Moscow¹. As a result, I would lose my good relationship with my supervisors. [290] When I told my supervisor about the difficult situation of my family, they sympathized with me and said, "Before our unit is relocated, we will give you some days off." They carefully provided me with all the necessary documents for this leave. I went to my family in the Siberian village of Stepnoje. I arrived and saw a small, gentle boy wearing diapers and lying in a cradle as was common in German families. Indeed, he was a very nice boy. I looked at this birth certificate: David Toews, born in Stepnoje, Altai district, on 4 October.

After spending some time at home, I was approached and asked why I was still there. But my documents were fine, and confirmed that I was on leave until I would receive notification from my unit's administration indicating where they would be working after they left the bridge construction site. At one point, I was mobilized again. Whenever people did not recognize me thereby exposing me to a difficult situation, I always referred local authorities to the KGB colonel who had the most powerful position in the district. I also did this time. The colonel looked at my documents, and said that they were fine. He said I should reach out to him again if I was threatened, otherwise just stay at home. He took the receiver, and called the local administrator who had troubled me. He said that they should leave me alone, and that he knew what had to be done. After this, I lived peaceably with my family for about three months.

Then my unit's supervisor informed me that they were in Tula. I went to my colonel. He told me everything was fine, and that I should go to Tula the next day. I received a train ticket free of charge, and left. I had been able to prepare a lot for my family in those three months. I also earned some money for them. My wife had prepared a full sack of roasted bread for me. That was a little too much. When I changed trains in Novosibirsk, they took my bread away from me. I couldn't do anything about it. That happened at night when I was not able to explain my situation to anyone. My train was ready, so I had to leave.

While I was still at home, I learned why they had arrested Katja's sister-in-law. She was an energetic person. She had brought wheat to the kolkhoz' barn floor, and also accepted wheat there. She then put some grain in her skirt pocket, and took it home to make some food for her children. I can imagine that this woman had many times not resisted the temptation to put grain in her pocket, and take it home. Even though she didn't have a stockpile at home, this mother of three children was sentenced to prison for five years for theft. That was terrible. During my leave, we had visited her in jail several times. On these occasions, we brought her food. The poor woman had to suffer in prison for her "guilt."

¹ Tula, Tula Oblast, Russia. 100 km straight south of Moscow.

I sat in my railway carriage to Moscow. I would join my unit in the big town of Tula south of Moscow. Everything went fine. [291] The station where they would uncouple my railway car was only ten kilometres away. At that place I needed to change to a branch line where a train ran only once a day. The train for that day had already left. Therefore, I needed to spend one night there. This wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was having to take a sanitary bath at each transfer station before you were allowed to enter another train. That often took some time so that you might not finish before the departure of your next train since there were just too many people. If you were not able to take the compulsory bath, you would have to wait yet another day. I thought about it and decided to go through this procedure the next morning so that I would be ready to take my train. I would sit through the night in the waiting room as many people did.

When the night began, the chatter ceased. Although you could only sit, most passengers had fallen half asleep, or at least closed their eyes. You needed to stay awake otherwise you could fall prey to thieves. Two watchmen paced up and down in the waiting room. I noticed that the watchmen paid particular attention to me, however, it might just have been my imagination. No! After two hours, one of the watchmen put himself in front of me, and asked me for my documents. Fearfully, I handed my documents over to him. He turned them back and forth, then in a very clipped voice he said, "Follow me." I stood up, and did what he wanted. I came to a room on whose door I read the sign saying Militia. A colonel sat in that room. My watchman introduced me, "We need to find out who this man is." Then he left. I had to deliver my pocket watch, belt and jackknife, and had to answer several troubling questions. The colonel who examined me was especially puzzled by the fact that I was German. Why would a German be brought to the front lines? After recognizing that he could not manage my case, he said, "Go behind this curtain." He pointed. "There is a day bed there, and you can lie down. We have to wait until morning to see what happens." I laid there as if I had fallen asleep. I even snored, but I was bravely keeping myself awake to hear what was said behind that curtain. I often recognized the word "jail." It was clear to me that my life was over if I had to go to jail. In jail, no one would care about me. If I was imprisoned, I would die. What was I supposed to do now? I couldn't come up with any good idea. After a time, they asked me to come back to the table, and asked me the same questions all over again. Another colonel entered the room, sat down, and only listened to our conversation. He suddenly said to his colleagues, "Are you not aware of the fact that there are thousands of German inhabitants in our country? There was even a German republic in the Volga region until the war broke out. Then it was dissolved. In many areas, we have German populations. They now serve in the Labour Army." My explanation that I belonged to this group of Germans, and that my railway car had been uncoupled close to the town of Bolochovo had not helped.

I noticed that things gradually became serious, and that I was close to being jailed. I remembered my own principle to reach out to the highest official when in dangerous situations. My interrogator was surprised by this request. However, the colonel of higher rank said that they could not decline my request since I wished. [292] I said to them, "No, that is not a wish, but a request." I stood resolutely. My interrogator pressed a button (I knew this procedure from earlier occasions), and a watchman on duty entered the room. They ordered, "Bring this man to the senior KGB colonel." We went through one door, then another, and still through a third. On the fourth door, I read an inscription,

“Rumyanzev, Senior Colonel, KGB.” I was surprised by this name. Was this one of my former headmasters? However, I then realized that his name was not “Rumyanzeva” since that was a female name. I was announced; I entered the room. A very intelligent man sat in front of me. He reminded me of Ranovitsch. My attendant introduced me. The colonel gave him a short command, “Go away.” Now only the two of us sat in the room. He said, “Tell me your story.” I told him my story briefly and precisely while the colonel was going through my documents. He then asked one or two short questions. While decisively answering his question, he had pressed the button even before I was finished. My attendant entered the room. The colonel said to him, “Listen to my order.” The man prepared and said, “I am listening.” The colonel ordered that the watchman was in charge to bring me to the sanitary bath as quickly as possible, and help me get to my train. Afterward, he was to return to the colonel, and report how he had executed his order. My attendant asked whether his order meant that they had to release me completely. He was assured that this was exactly the case. Furthermore, I was to be helped to continue my travel (since they had held me back), and to make sure that I could move on without delay. I asked my benefactor in order to regain the things that had been taken away from me, namely my pocket watch, belt and jackknife. In anger, he took the speaking tub, and ordered the speedy return of all my belongings. He also prompted them to hurry so that I could catch my train since it would arrive very soon. I thanked the colonel, and we left. The entire procedure in this room had taken only about five minutes. We hurried to the bath. From the bath, I had to check out at the luggage room, where I had dropped my bags. After this, we went to the railway platform where my train was arriving at that very moment. I entered the train like a “officer” accompanied by my own militiaman. I waved goodbye to my “servant,” and the train moved off.

My principle of reaching out to the highest official when in difficult circumstances had proven its effectiveness again. I thought about this while riding to my final stop. It reinforced my firm belief that corrupt and oppressed people did great harm to their victims when acting independently because of their lack of knowledge. Their victims had no chance to free themselves. Of course, a superior could also cause great harm to someone but you could usually provide him with an opportunity to demonstrate his superiority by exhibiting a polite, but submissive attitude towards him. (You need to be aware that this applies especially to Slavs.) [293] A superior can show his grace to the “submissive worm.” At the same time, he demonstrates to his subordinates that he is their strict master by giving them orders that they need to carry out immediately. As a result, the innocent can experience more justice. There is no risk in reaching out to the higher, if not highest, official. That was always the case. Just think about the example of Paul, the apostle of Christ, in the New Testament when he appealed to the Roman Emperor during his imprisonment.

Meanwhile, my train arrived at my final destination. When I reported to the head of my brigade, I received the following information. Workers who were in good shape had to go to the coal mine. In the case that they proved to be unable to cope with the challenging work, and the unusual working conditions, they had to work at the construction site. Those were now the rules for the German workers who served in the Labour Army. I understood that they were compelled to send me to the coal mine according to these rules. During the night, I thought about whether I should contact the building department in charge of the

construction site directly. The next morning, I went to the building engineer in charge. I explained who I was, told him my story, and what I was capable of doing. He told me that because of the rules I had to work in the coal mine. He asked me whether I was knowledgeable in building houses and barracks. I explained that I knew where they wanted me to work, but that he could help me if the section he was responsible for needed my skill since the higher administrators did not know me. He looked me over, and said that he would like to have me, and did need my skill. My response was that he then needed to come up with a plan considering that he found it worthwhile. I only wanted to know what he was thinking very soon otherwise people might suspect that I was not even working. He said, “Wait!” He signaled for me to wait for a moment. The head of the building department received us, and the conversation was short. The next day, I was charged with responsibility for a building brigade, workers from our section of the Labour Army. I knew some of these men already.

I lived in the camp of the Germans who served in the Labour Army. The camp consisted of some barracks, kitchens, and so forth. The internal organization of the camp, the diet, the methods to escape the commander of the camp—things were hardly different here from the organization of Stalin’s famous gulags in northern Russia. The entire camp complex was surrounded by a barbed wire fence three metres high. There were watchtowers at the corners. Armed watchmen always stood at the gate, which was both the entrance and the exit. At dawn, a convoy took us to our place of work. In the evening, when it was still bright, the convoy took us home. Our diet consisted of 800 grams of bread, and we had a half litre of *kondjor* in the morning and the evening. *Kondjor* was a water gruel without any calories. There was barely any salt in it. It only had a little cabbage and some beans. We had no days off. Sometimes we would get one day off in a month. However, we also had so much to do on our so-called day off that we did not get any rest that day. We had to take a bath, or bake our clothing¹. We de-loused our beds. We washed our clothing if we had anything to wash. There was no way to stitch everything that needed mending.

The first people to die of malnutrition were the elderly and youngest of our group after five or six months. The number of people who were unable to work gradually increased. [294] More and more people who worked in the coal mine also died. First, two or three died per day. Later, four or five. All workers became silent—we ceased to talk with each other. A long time previously, we had also stopped greeting each other. We also washed less, or not at all. These tendencies indicated that most workers thought that they would die soon, or would slowly pine away. Living under these circumstances, why should they continue to care about their worldly existence? The workers gradually worked at the building a lot more slowly.

I had an excellent assistant by the name of Hanemann, who often had good ideas in addition to his immediate work duties. One day, I had to fulfil a task at a place that was a little bit away from our construction site. While returning home, he said to me that he planned to go hunting that night. That meant he would slip through the barbed wire to leave the camp. He said that he had prepared a slip-through in any case. He would slip through a

¹ Later, David explains that clothes were placed in the ovens of the bathroom stoves in order to de-louse them.

spot under the watchtower when the night would be very dark. In the first place, the watchmen did not expect such bold action right under their noses, so to speak. Secondly, it was difficult to monitor what happened under the tower because it was dark around the watchtower; otherwise, they would have been unable to watch the fence that stood away from the watchtower. I was nervous, and couldn't sleep. I did not know what his exact plan was. But I also hadn't asked him about the details. I did not want to know in the case his plan turned out to be a failure. After the night watch was done with their patrol, my friend disappeared. Two to three hours later, he woke me up (I had fallen asleep in the meantime) and showed me a bag with a piece of meat. As I wanted to ask him something, he covered my mouth with his bloody and dirty hand. I think that was a smart decision. I shouldn't be allowed to know anything about it. Before the morning signal, he had "fried" the piece of meat in the bathroom that was slightly away from the barracks. By frying, I mean that he had dried it on the steam pipe. He assured me that everything had gone well. He told me that when he had gone along a road to go to our remote work site, he had found a dead horse. He immediately came up with this nighttime plan. Fortunately, everything had gone well. We now had additional food for several days. He also found a place where he could store the meat: he put the meat piece by piece under our barracks, where the meat was exposed to airflow. Time passed.

Several times I had seen the building engineer, who had enabled me to work at the construction site. But it seems that he had forgotten about me, and wasn't interested. He had other worries. However, I had also undergone some changes during this time because the situation had increasingly become more difficult. Our diet had gotten even worse. All of us were weak, and we continued to lose our energy. It was obvious that we had lost hope. I had not heard anything from my family for a long time. However, I had also not told them about the difficult situation. I wondered how long I would be able to stay alive. From my own observation, I knew that if humans started to swell up because of malnutrition, they would enter the last stage of their life on earth. It seemed to me that my legs and eyelids were becoming stiff. [295] As people often say, you can be quite lucky under the circumstances. I was experiencing how this was happening to me. My fellows gradually became weaker. I was sorry for them. Yet, I was unable to help them. These days, I had heard that my building engineer was at the construction site but I had not seen him. I wanted to talk with him. I had to find a way out as quickly as possible otherwise it would be too late. One day, my workers had started constructing a gable that was six metres high. They fixed a ladder to reach the highest point of the gable. However, they lacked the energy to perform this task. They did not think that they had enough power to hold themselves up with one hand while nailing with the other hand. I realized that I had to go first. I was the first worker who climbed the ladder. Then I nailed the most difficult spot. When climbing down, the ladder slipped out of position, and I fell onto stones and pieces of wood.

When I came to, my building engineer was bent over me looking me in the face. Being half asleep, I heard him say, "I have your wallet." However, I fell into unconsciousness again, and when I woke up, I was in the hospital. The following day, the engineer visited me. I did not really feel like talking to him since I was unable to engage in a conversation. At our first meeting, I only said that I was thankful. However, I was wondering whether it might not have been better for me to work in the coal mine. He asked me whether I thought I had a better chance of survival there. I replied, "No, I would not have a better chance

there. Yet, I also have no chance of survival at the construction site. If I had worked in the coal mine, my earthly suffering would already be over.” Before the engineer went away, he had put my wallet under my pillow, and told me, “I wanted to make sure that no one stole your wallet so I took it out of your pocket.” While he was doing this, I fell asleep again. I recovered within a week, although I still felt some pain in my neck. No one wanted to keep a patient, especially a German, too long in the hospital. I was released and forced to continue working. When I returned to the barracks, I noticed that someone had opened my little box to steal my razor, and other items. My wool suit was still there. As I met the engineer at my work place, he greeted me by shaking my hand. He asked me whether I had any request. I asked him to allow me to take the next Sunday off so that I could go to the market to sell my wool suit. He allowed me to take this day off. As a result of this, I could afford an extra ration of 100 grams of bread, and a small glass of defatted sour milk every day. You had to pay ten rubles (thirty German marks) on the free market for this ration. The additional food helped me to get well again.

My partial recovery didn’t last long. Our living conditions in the camp also got worse since there was a new camp supervisor. They employed a former soldier who had fought at the front. The new supervisor was a chauvinist who believed in the idea of Great Russia. His name was Petuchov. His heart was full of hatred against everything German. He introduced new regulations. At the workplace and the camp yard, we were only allowed to speak Russian. When all workers had returned in the evening, we had to go to the yard, [296] line up in rows, and be counted. This procedure took one whole hour. Then they would call out some people, and publicly insult them with base, threatening words because of various “offences.” In the morning, the entire unit had to stand in line before going through the gate to the street so that a convey could pick them up to take them to their workplaces. We also had to march in a row to the workplace. (Before this we had been allowed to walk freely in groups.) From time to time, they examined our barracks. They rummaged through our clothes, bed clothes, and boxes. Indeed, they come up with all possible terrible tortures. Most of the time, they had referred to the Germans as “Fritzen.” Now they were allowed to insult and deride every German, and to throw the grossest slander at them. It is difficult to imagine how much they tortured the Germans who served in the Labour Army. The atmosphere was shaped by hatred. It was terrible. However, that was not the only issue. In our free time, we had gradually built a new dining hall for the camp. There were two dining rooms. There was a big one for the Russian workers, and a smaller one for the German workers. This is how Germans were deprived of their legal food ration: in the big Russian dining room, they had thick soup, while we got thin soup in “Fritzen’s little hall.” We had sometimes been allowed to go to the citizens of the city and villages as a reward for good work. We could earn some money, or get a free meal for doing some small job. The citizens also benefited from this. However, now that was also strictly forbidden, and they prosecuted offences. In general, we were not allowed to go outside on our own any longer. Under these circumstances, the physical and mental state of the German workers rapidly deteriorated. The daily death toll increased. Five to seven people died each day. The people who had become too weak to work formed a group of gravediggers who “buried” the bodies of their fellow sufferers at night. The following day, they also might have to be buried. The mailbox was removed from the entrance of the camp. The already poor connection between our families and us was absolutely severed.

When I remember the living conditions in our camp in Tula, I can say that they did resemble those in the Gulag Archipelago, about which I learned by reading Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book. The camp systems were pretty much the same, even though they were geographically far away from each other.

After I had run out of my additional food supplies by spending the last ruble that I had from my suit, I became afraid. My colleague, Hahnemann, had disappeared. They caught him when he went on one of his hunts which were always carefully carried out to his own advantage. He was tried and jailed. I lost him forever. My physical state became worse and worse. My legs got heavy, and my beard had grown. I had also lost my interest in singing. Singing was also forbidden in the barracks. Now my eyesight grew worse. It gradually became weaker, and my eyes discharged pus. I went to a doctor who did not know how to help me, but he did give me a sick note so that I did not have to go to work any longer. [297] Considering that I had not gone to work for a long time, the question emerged whether my daily bread ration should be reduced from 800 to 600 grams. In this situation, I was urged to reach out to the head building engineer. As already mentioned, we had a good relationship. When he saw me, he was surprised and said, "That is not possible." I replied, "As you can see, I will not be able to come to you a second time. I know that you are not a medical doctor. I will also not kneel before you. You have this choice: either you help me, or you forget about me. You need to decide what you do. I will soon find out how you will have decided. That's it. Goodbye, or I will see you soon." I returned to my barracks very slowly, but at peace. I said to myself, "I am no better than many of us who are buried under the ground. Apart from this, I have to remember that God's help will come if the suffering reaches its peak." I then looked for a pencil and some sheets. From that day onward, I wanted to write something like a diary. However, I did not manage to start it then. Our supervisor Petuchov swaggered into the barrack. I stood up as all of us had to do. He started swearing. He gradually intensified his insults. He threatened me by saying that they would arrest me in the detention room. This was a small cell where they arrested those of us who had committed severe offences. Detainees only got a daily ration consisting of 200 grams of bread and two glasses of water. The detainee had to sit for three to seven days. Petuchov was a small man even though he deemed himself to be a very strong man. I did not contradict him at all. When he left the barracks, I sat down. Now the time had come when we went to the dining room. After dinner, I laid down. The next day, I would go to the doctor. That evening, I went to the bathroom to "bake" all my clothing and bedclothes. After returning from the bathroom, I noticed that everyone was silent in the barracks. The men had gone to bed. I did the same.

The next day, I went to the doctor. After he had examined my eyes, he asked me what I would do when I lost my eyesight completely. I answered him, "I don't know. My priority is to survive." The doctor then showed me a list. He said to me, "Look at this list. Here, you will find your name. Tomorrow the body which decides on the camp detainees will meet and discuss your case." I asked about the members of this body. He replied to me that he himself, a relative of the head building engineer, and Petuchov, our supervisor, were members of this body. I said goodbye to the doctor. The next day I would learn whether the building engineer would prove his friendship, or whether Petuchov would have the final say. I was sure that the doctor would insist that I would not recover from my eye disease

since he had confirmed that to me several times. I was optimistic, but I did not show my optimism to anyone in the camp. That night seemed very long.

The meeting of the decision body took place. I was released from work at the construction site. However, I had to undergo systematic medical treatment at the hospital. According to this, even though I no longer worked at the construction I wouldn't lose my food ration. I had to go to the city hospital to follow the advice of my medical doctor. Twice a week I had to walk ten kilometres to get to the hospital. [298] That was not an easy task. Nonetheless, the decision saved my life, and not only mine. I now had the opportunity to go to the market of Tula twice a week. I could achieve several things there, and I could also buy products. I could help out some of my fellows because they had no chance to go to the city. After a short while, my lower-ranking supervisors also put in orders to me for the city. As a result, my popularity began growing. When my eyesight improved, I could again do some work. In doing so, I could also improve my material situation. I always had flexible, skillful hands. I was able to produce different items out of various materials. I also had the opportunity to sell some products at the city market. Later on, I went to some houses where there always were things to repair. I got something to eat in exchange for my service. At one point my higher-ranking supervisors noticed that they could make use of my services. Working for them was particularly important. They became uninterested in forcing me to resume working at the construction site any longer. It was legal that I did not work because of my recovery. No one found out that I did extra jobs for anyone. Likewise, you could not reproach a supervisor for employing the services of their worker. I was reliable. I did not reveal for whom I had done jobs, or what I had received as compensation for service. When I had some extra supplies, I shared them with fellows who were in need. In this way, I secured my position. No one was envious of me. In the course of my life, I have often experienced how envy resulted in accusations against me. Similarly, greed results in resentment and suspicions. One day, the camp supervisor Petuchov asked me (to my surprise, he did not order me) to repair a door at the house of his boss (Petuschov, of course, wasn't the top autocrat). I immediately promised to do this. I now felt that I had heaped coals of fire on his head. I was very much looking forward to going his boss' house. After finding the street, the house, and the proper address that they had told me, I read on a plate, "Tereschtschenko, Head of the KGB." (I could not help thinking about Ranovitsch and his daughter Schura. I wondered whether she studied at university or had been evacuated. The Ranovitsch family had been Jewish, and almost certainly had fled from Hitler's SS-troops. But I didn't feel hatred against this family any longer. In 1935-1936, when I met them in Stalino, I had very different feelings. It is wonderful how feelings can change. Now I even felt pity for them. Because of the father? No. Because of the mother? No. They had enjoyed enough happiness on earth. However, their daughter, Schura, had a good soul. It was not her fault that she was Jewish.)

I knocked on the door. A voice said to me, "Please come in." I entered the room and saw an impressive man sitting behind a desk. [299] We greeted each other. I stood at the door and explained why I was here. I told him about Petuchov's order. The local head of the KGB replied, "Well." He showed me what he wished me to do and provided me with the necessary materials for the job. When I asked, he allowed me to use the desk in the antechamber. The materials and nails fit their purpose. In a half-hour, I had fixed the door hinge. The man sitting behind his desk looked at me puzzled, and said, "You are very quick,

aren't you? I guess you often have done such jobs." Without reluctance, I replied, "Indeed, I had various jobs in my life. However, today was the first time that I fixed the door hinge belonging to a local head of the KGB." He laughed about my comment and said to me, "Please, sit down, comrade Toews." Hearing this, I noticed that Petuchov had never referred to me as "comrade." My comrade Tereschtschenko asked me to tell him a little bit about my life since I had done so many different jobs. I knew the kind of narratives that interested these people. I told him my life story in a way that made him feel that he was watching a short movie. I did not conceal that I had already had some experiences with the KGB. We discussed some episodes of my life. I got the impression that this man was not so bad. We also talked about Germans in Russia. He ended this topic by reassuring me that the Germans would never again play an important role among the Russian nations as it had in the past. He asked me what I planned to do after the war ended. I replied that I had to fight to survive right now. I had to wait to see what would happen to my eyes. He said, "Well, anyways. We will see you again. See you then. Goodbye, Comrade Toews. Thank you." He shook my hand, and I returned to my barracks. I wondered what had happened to me.

On the following day, Petuchov treated me no different than usual but I sensed that he was slightly more cautious. He asked me whether I had gone to the local head of the KGB. After affirming his question, told me that his boss had been very content with my work. Petuchov then asked me whether his boss questioned me about life in the barracks. I answered, "I told him that we believed that he was in control of everything. Therefore, things went the way they went." I thought Petuchov's intention was that his boss could legitimately make use of our people's labour. However, he had a guilty conscience since he had humiliated me and scolded me for no reason. I was afraid that he thought I would take this as an ideal opportunity to complain about him to his boss. I hadn't done that, but he felt uncomfortable about his own behaviour. I noticed that he would have liked this event to have never taken place, regretting his insults. I was content for now. So, I asked him whether I could do something for him. I noticed he started to feel better so I continued, "Tomorrow I will visit Tula. [300] However, I am free the day after tomorrow. You just have to let me know what I need to do so that I can bring the proper tools. Also, I do not know where you live." Then something happened that I had not expected. Petuchov told me about his marriage. His wife had worked as a nurse at the front where they had met. She was pretty young, and she had no idea how to keep a household. They had a cow that would soon give birth to a calf. He didn't know what to do, and his wife had even less idea. They also had a pig that needed to be slaughtered. However, they also did not know how to do that. They had many potatoes, and many other things, yet his wife was completely clueless. They did not maintain their barn and household as ordinary people did. When his wife asked other people for help, they only laughed at her. So she stopped asking, and she still did not know how to manage a household. He wanted to tell me more about his wife but I interrupted him to say that he should not continue to tell me about this since people like me had no idea. I only asked him to let me know whether his wife would be fine if a German came to their house. He had to consider that she had worked at the front. Would she willing to have a German in her house? I assured him that I would like to help him, but I did not want to provoke unrest. I couldn't afford that. He then gave me his address and gave me directions on paper. We said goodbye to each other. I had the impression that my Petuchov (we would call him rooster in German) did not know what to do with his hen!

Today it looked like this hen may have tortured her rooster, considering that this rooster was a complete idiot. But it did not matter what happened, I would stick to my business. I had to be cautious. I might actually be able to do something for them.

On the following day, I went to see my doctor, professor Petrov. His nurse's assistant, who was a young girl, prepared me to see the doctor. To my surprise, she asked me whether I would be knowledgeable in German literature and language since I was a German. I explained to the girl that I had worked as a German teacher and translator for many years. I said, "I am familiar with German medical literature. In my family, we used to have several medical professionals. However, I do not know if many of my siblings are still alive." The girl was intimidated by my reply, and she retreated from her question. She had spent too much time with me. Someone called her. I had noticed that she was a medical student who had difficulty translating German text.

When approaching the doctor, it was obvious that he knew what had occurred. He was a very intelligent man. It was a pleasure for me to talk with him. He asked me who I was, and where I had studied, and whether I would be willing to help his student a bit. I admitted that I enjoyed helping other people. However, it seemed to me that just translating texts for her would not be the best way to help her, even though that was a very easy task. Furthermore, I could only help her as long as the doctor was treating me. [301] After he declared me fit to do physical work again, I wouldn't be coming to Tula any longer, but would have to work at the construction site in Bolochoy. He noticed at what I was hinting. In a smiling voice he said, "Then we will make your capacity for physical labour, that is the recovery of your eyesight, dependent on your support of my student." I understood, and thanked him. He continued, "We will manage this. Don't worry." He shook my hand and told his student, whose name was Nadja, to come. He said to her, "This man's name is David Ivanovich. He will help you as much as he can, but you also need to be diligent."

I followed the girl to a small room where we could work. We decided to meet twice a week for two hours. This is the way I won the favour of the hospital. One day, the professor told me that he could heal 50 to 60 percent of his patients in a short time if he had enough sugar. But there was a shortage of sugar. Where could he get sugar in wartime? Yet, his efforts did not help much during this sugar shortage. From that time forward, I walked the ten kilometres back and forth twice a week. My eyesight made barely any improvement while I helped the young student to make successful progress for six months.

I walked to the city along the path parallel to a railway track.¹ I could always walk there despite the rain, snow, and other bad weather. It was safe, and I was not afraid of getting lost despite my weak eyesight. Each time I followed my own footprints, so to speak. Sometimes a train outpaced me. Obviously, I needed to stay out of the way of the train. One day while walking, all of sudden I felt a strong hit in my left hip. Someone yelled at me to get off the railway embankment. A long cargo train then flew past us. After regaining my wits while lying on the ground, I caught clear sight of the man. His insulting words

¹ From the various bits of description, the camp was probably located 54° 6' 35.8452"N 37° 48' 11.1846"E, 2 kilometres north-northwest of Bolochoy, Tula Oblast, Russia. Remains can be seen in 2021.

were still in my ears. The man dragged me and yelled, "For fuck's sake! Are you drunk?" I must have looked very odd, considering my ulcerated eyes. When he calmed down, he told me that from some distance he had noticed how I had been staggering from the right to left, and he had run after me. He thought that I was drunk. The train had been rapidly approaching us. It had whistled, and made some signals. Yet, I had completely ignored them. He had increased his speed until he had caught up to me. I had already experienced what he had done after that. The man asked me where, who, and what, and so forth. After calming down, he said to me, "I also once fell asleep while I was walking. I know exactly how you felt. However, you should leave the railway tracks if you are exhausted. In this case, you should lie down and take a short nap. Then you can continue walking. At the end of the day, you are not at the front." [302] We had a conversation about our experiences for a couple of minutes. The man stood up and said, "I need to leave." He shook my hand. I expressed my gratitude to my saviour. We went down the railway embankment together. Before parting, he shouted at me to take care. I slowly walked on my way realizing what had happened to me, and what could have happened. I thanked my guardian angel and Providence again. Indeed, I had fallen asleep while I walking since I was so exhausted. If the man hadn't come by, I would have gone to heaven in my sleep. But my time had not yet come. I already had believed that you will suffer less living beyond the stars than in this starving world. After having just a little bit, even if not significantly more to eat, I only wanted to live in order to survive. In addition, I had a mission to begin tomorrow. I would start at the home of my supervisor, Petuchov. I thought about what I might experience there.

The following day, I walked to my new workplace. I entered the yard full of curiosity. At first, I was a little bit reluctant to knock on the door the first time. The second time, I knocked more loudly. I heard steps. Someone opened the door. A child stood in front of me. This person had to be the wife of my boss given Petuchov's description. However, she was a child. Looking at her eyes, I noticed that she was unhappy and desperate. We looked at each other for a second. I then asked whether I was at Petuchov's house. She answered my question in the affirmative. I asked her whether I could see Mrs. Petuchov. From our first meeting, I wanted to make clear to this young girl that I thought she was too young to be a wife, and that I was surprised by her age. She answered that she was Mrs. Petuchov, and she asked how she could help me. I apologized and explained the purpose of my visit. I also told her who I was, and who had asked me to visit. Then I noticed a smile on her face. She asked me to come in. We entered a small, poorly furnished hall. There was a desk with a cross base. There were two stools and some other piece of furniture. The woman offered me a seat. Then she excused herself and disappeared. She returned without wearing an apron, and having combed her hair. She took a seat at the end of the desk, and looked at me. I noticed her helplessness. I asked her whether she and her husband had agreed that I should help her. She said yes but she did not know where to begin. I interrupted her explaining that I was here to help her with everything. I told her that I first needed to know how to address her. She said, "Just call me Raja." I replied, "No, this would not be right. Your husband calls you by that name, but I am a stranger to you. May I call you Raissa Ivanovna?" She was surprised by the fact that I knew that the name of her father was Ivan. I answered, "I was not aware of this. Please, correct me if I am wrong. [303] When I am unsure about a correct name, I will just come up with a name. If I am incorrect, I always expect to be corrected." She replied, "There is no reason to correct you. You were right the

first time.” I then said, “Well, Raissa I, please tell me, in which areas you have difficulties, so that I can get a picture of the situation, and know how to begin.” With this, the young woman shared her story with me. Her father had worked as an accountant. She attended the seventh grade. She was a good student, and had successfully passed a paramedic course. At that time, the idea that going voluntarily to the front was promoted as being a patriotic act. However, she was only 15 years old, and her parents did not want her to go to the front. Her father had joined the army as a colonel, and had fallen in battle shortly after joining. Without asking her mother, Raissa joined as a military paramedic, and was sent to the front. She was stationed at a hospital because of her youth. She met her husband there when he was receiving medical treatment after he was wounded. He was a good-looking soldier, and very persistent. So, she had fallen prey to him. Yet her man was also very stupid. He was barely able to read and write. He came from a poor family, the oldest of three sons. His two younger brothers were foolish as well. She wasn’t interested in marrying him, but he didn’t go back to the front. Instead, he applied to become a commander of a detention camp. She added, “Now that we are here, I don’t know what to do with myself. I can’t return home. My mother told me in a letter that I am not alone anymore, and as a married woman, I belong to my husband, and my husband belongs to me. We are not lacking materially, but I do not know how to run a household. My husband has no idea either. He has never done housework in his life. In general, he can’t do anything except be rude. I will show you everything. Maybe you will be able to help.” She became quiet, and I saw tears in her eyes.

I hadn’t interrupted the girl so that she could say everything she wanted. I realized that Raissa Ivanovna wished to be free of her many tasks. When she was finished, I asked her for permission to speak. She replied, “Of course. However, I am not sure how I should address you since you haven’t told me your name.” I replied, “Your husband refers to me as ‘Old Fritz.’ But at school they called me David Ivanovich. You can choose the name you wish. But there are only two important things to me. First of all, I do not want to meddle in your family matters. I do not know how to deal with them. Your husband is my boss. I ask you to say nothing negative about him in my presence, nothing he would not like me to hear. Secondly, you need to trust in me. Be assured that I will try to help you. Now I need to find out where to begin.”

We went to the barn where a cow and pig were standing in manure and fodder up to their knees. They did not have anything to eat, and there wasn’t even a food trough!

I took over the entire household for the girl. I furnished the barn, and I made feed troughs. I taught the girl how to feed animals, and how to save fodder. I took care of her cow as it calved. I showed her how to butcher a pig, and how to preserve the meat. I also helped her with her housework. I taught her how to do many things. [304] This is how many weeks and months passed. The girl became confident in me, but I never sat with her at the table. I also tried to leave her home before her husband returned. When Raissa Ivanovna invited me to have tea with her and her husband in the evening, I declined explaining, “I cannot imagine that your husband would approve you inviting a male stranger to evening tea without his consent.” She replied, “I get your point. However, Petja (the Russian version of Peter) would not complain.” I answered, “That might be true, but if you want me to come, he would also need to ask me.” She asked, “Should I ask for his

permission?" I gave her a brief and resolute answer, "You and your husband are a married couple. Your conversations are not my business. I am sorry for this. Goodbye!"

At the beginning of 1945, I learned that the Soviet government decreed that all teachers had the right to work as teachers again, wherever they had been employed. The only condition was that their work at their current workplace was not needed any longer. That could apply to me. I wondered how to obtain my right to teach again. I did not know how—I had no documents that confirmed that I had been a teacher. Should I write to my wife? I did not know whether she still had some of my documents. My wife would have been sad about learning that I could not leave the Labour Army because I lacked documents that proved that I was a teacher. How could I obtain these documents? I thought about this question day and night. I couldn't just wait. At this point, I had been incapable of working for two weeks. Obviously, there must be a way for me to leave the Labour Army. One night, I came up with the idea contact the head of the local KGB to tell him about my situation. However, it was too late to dare to take this step by myself. The next time when I was preparing to go to the Petuchov's house, the head of the KGB was already thinking about me. Before I had left the barracks, our supervisor told me that the head of the KGB wanted to talk to me. This was a surprise. I went to him immediately. I went to the street where his house stood with the sign on the door saying, Tereschtschenko Head of the KGB. I stood in front of that door with the hinges I had fixed some months previously, and knocked.

To my surprise, Tereschtschenko left his desk and approached me, and offered a handshake with his right hand. I greeted him in Russian, "Good afternoon, Mr. Tereschtschenko." He welcomed me, also in Russian, "Good afternoon, Comrade Toews." This had never happened to me before, that the head of the KGB approached me to shake my hand. I accepted his greeting, and he offered me a chair and passed a printed sheet to me. He said, "Read it." I carefully read the document. My boss had not taken a seat. He was wandering around the room, looking at me to see how I reacted to the document. After I had been finished reading, he asked, "This is a good document, isn't it?" I affirmed that it was. When my boss noticed that I was not enthusiastic, he asked me whether I wasn't happy that I could work as a teacher again. [305] I replied, "Obviously, I am happy to learn about it. Yet, I still don't know when I can teach again." My boss then asked, "Would you like to have a teaching position in our city?" I answered, "No, I cannot work as a teacher here." Of course, my boss was interested to learn why I didn't want to work as a teacher there. I explained that a teacher's success depended on the students, parents, and the general public having confidence in his ethical and political reliability. "Yet, we Germans, including me, are sometimes called 'Fritzchen.' Fritzchen often means the same as 'fascists' especially for children. You know that yourself." He said, "That is just the situation." I interrupted, "No, this isn't the case at all. There are only certain groups that make this claim. Most Russian Germans were opposed to fascism and Hitler as much as the Russians." I added, "Let us return to the document. I am sure that some teacher might benefit from it." Tereschtschenko then asked, "Why can't all teachers benefit from this order?" I replied, "I thought that you needed proper documents to prove that you are a teacher or another kind of specialist. Most teachers who are serving in Labour Army don't have these documents. It is hardly possible to obtain them while here. I suspect that you are aware of this." My boss was silent. I noticed that he had not prepared for a conversation

like this. He asked me what I wanted to do next. I said frankly that I did not know what to do. The supervisors had to figure out what to do. He then asked, "In your opinion, what should we do?" I told him that I had been in the detention camp for two years without being capable of working. In addition to this, the doctors were not optimistic, and did not think that my eyes would improve. There were also other detainees who suffered from incurable diseases. If they did not wish to have these disabled people perish, the supervisors could appeal to the advisory board of the detention camp to send these sick detainees home. I had not expressed my opinion in a discontented or a critical tone. Instead, I had conveyed resignation, hopelessness, and grief.

My boss was again silent. He then said we would have to see what to do next. Our goodbye was less enthusiastic than our greetings had been. Was it my fault? I slowly walked along the street until reaching the barracks. I was tired, exhausted, and sad. I stood looking through the window, and saw how the doomed detainees struggled with the funeral cart. Today, there were six bodies in that cart. The men who took the bodies to the mass grave would be taken to it in the same manner on the next day. I remembered the following verses¹.

The death of slumber is calm. The earth's womb is cold. No worries, no deceiving passions will disturb our peace under the ground. All our small and big worries will fall asleep with us.

Our groans and tears will be wiped off forever. All our wishes and our dreams will come true. Burning hearts will cease to feel and turn being buried under the ground.

Bury my heart, which has not been appalled by worldly worries, under the ground as well! Here, the peace of my heart won't be disturbed anymore.

My dear cold grave, when will you welcome me to your serenity?

Meanwhile, the horse-drawn funeral car slowly rolled away from the courtyard. [306] It does not matter where humans die. They might be lower or higher class. They might dwell in shacks or palaces. But, in any case, death cannot delay or interrupt the course of time. History will go on, including the ill treatment of detainees in the concentration camps in Tula. However, I should be able to escape this history. I was not counted when they checked the numbers of detainees in the morning and evening. I didn't have to listen to the prison guards' shouts. They used to shout in Russian, "Line up in a row!" or "Move on." At the exit gate, the young armed prison guards didn't ask me to show them a permit to leave the camp since I had often given them a package of tobacco instead of a permit. It wasn't a bribe. It simply would have been too difficult to pull out the necessary document from my bag. No, that would have been easy but showing my permit to them every time would have made me nervous. By contrast, the friendly smiling boys calmed me down. It wasn't difficult to make these watchdogs smile by giving them a small package of tobacco, or a matchbox. Likewise, I didn't have to wait any longer at the front of the dining hall in

¹ Quoted from: *Ruhig ist des Todes Schlummer*

order to get a dipper of a water gruel with three peas in it. Instead, I went there after the groups of workers had already passed the exit gate. Even though the soup did not contain any calories, it was warm, and thus good for the stomach. I did not starve anymore, although the food I got hadn't many calories.

Every day the barracks became more and more empty. The former occupants were now buried in a mass grave. Their poor bodies were decaying. At the same time, the lice and bugs fought over the few drops of blood that ran through the veins of the living detainees. It was just terrible. The two or three storey bunk beds that stood in the barracks had been built with wet lumber. As a result, much of the wood had split. Red parasites had occupied those cracks. They were waiting for the bodies of the slave workers that had little blood to begin with. After they came home from work, the parasites spent their entire energy to get their blood. In contrast to the parasites, which were only working at night, the lice were more active. They worked day and night without taking breaks, except for the lice that had settled into the bedclothes. The lice in clothing worked all the time. Only a few people changed their clothes. First of all, the vast majority of detainees had no blanket anymore. Secondly, people who placed their clothes beside their pallets were unlikely to see their legal property again because it would be stolen. In this way, lice were swarming on all the pallets and beneath everyone's clothes. Twice a week, everyone who still cared a little about himself was allowed to bring his lice ridden clothes to the stove in the bathroom. At night, the sky of Tula received the 'good' aromas from the stoves, cadaveric odours, in fact. You could not expect the population of Tula, who was hoping for the end of the war, to bear such a stench. Once, during the three years I lived in the camp, war was declared against the millions, if not billions, of parasites and bloodsuckers. When the number of detainees gradually declined, it was possible to put us all in four barracks so that one barracks could always remain empty. In that empty building, they "executed" one annoying bloodsucker after the other. [307] They sealed the windows and doors of the barracks with clay and let suffocating gases into the rooms. They had to repeat this several times to ensure that they had exterminated all the parasites. Then they opened the doors and spent the next two days beating out the pallets. Parasites fell to the ground. They swept and gathered them together, took them with buckets and carts to holes that they had dug beforehand, and buried them. People who haven't seen such procedures themselves might think that this description is exaggerated, if not an outright lie. But you cannot imagine how many hundreds of such camps existed in communist paradise. Thousands, if not millions, of slave workers and deportees had to live there. How much blood the bloodsuckers took from them! Right up until today, the Soviet "democracy" has been using unbearable forced labour, hunger, and parasites as reliable tools.

Days and weeks went by. The trend continued—the number of inmates continued to decline. The spring of 1945 would soon begin. No human has decreed that the arrival of this hopeful season vitalizes plants, animals, and humans. Creatures consume more physical and psychological energy during spring. It is natural that all creatures need more calories in order to grow, especially at this time. If a creature cannot increase its caloric intake, it will only have an elementary life at best. This state is called stagnation. That creature will struggle to survive even if it gets a lower number of calories than usual during the time of blossoming. That also applied to our group. This spring, all our food sources were disappearing. Our bread supplies were running out. We did not have potatoes and

pickled vegetables anymore. Not even salt was available any longer. Of course, salt always was a scarce commodity in Russian war zones. The watered gruel turned into hot water. They only put some flour in the water so that it didn't look clear anymore. To somehow fill their stomachs, the detainees added the same amount of water again to the dipper of water gruel that they had received at the counter. They dipped a little bit of bread into the water. They then stirred it up. Then they spooned up this sort of thick water to fill their stomachs. That would mean there was no bread left to bite into. Can you imagine how such flavour-less "bread water" tasted? If someone found the head of a herring by accident, he would boil it to obtain some salt. During the last half of February until the end of March, you were already able to recognize who was going to die one or two days in advance. Usually, the doomed men avoided speaking as much as they could. They ceased to respond to questions. They always had a drop under the tip of their noses. They would try to wipe it away as much as they could, but the drop always reappeared. Often, they didn't even try. Starving people became entirely apathetic. People went through all the rubbish heaps hoping to find leftovers there. If they had success, they would immediately devour what they had discovered. Seeing such things was unavoidable.

[308] At the end of March, you could see the first plants growing on south-facing slopes, breaking through the ground to come closer to the sun. The detainees were eager to gather them, as many as they could, to fill their bellies. Doing this, they did not care what plants they picked. Their motto was, "What I see is mine." After the first stinging nettles had emerged, which were everywhere in Tula, and their leaves had grown to finger-length, then hand-length, the number of gravediggers didn't decrease. A group was supplied with bags so that they could go to the fields and forests to gather stinging nettles. The nettles were brought to the camp kitchen. Stinging nettles now became the main ingredient of the daily soup. In this way, the soup could be thickened, but it still tasted awful since we had no salt.

The water diet had a negative impact on the water secretion of the detainees' bodies. The kidneys and bladders were overburdened, and became inflamed. To speak about myself, I once urinated more than 25 times in just one 24-hour period. After you were back from urinating, you had to leave immediately again. Fortunately, I could still do this in a natural, proper, and normal manner since I was in the camp, and could walk freely. By contrast, the working detainees had problems. It was difficult for them to leave their work to relieve themselves each time they needed to. Their supervisors became provoked and scolded them or accused them that of just pretending to need to urinate. Obviously, constantly urinating prevented the detainees from working. But, holding their urine caused physical problems, uneasiness, and could even be dangerous. So, the slave workers were forced to relieve themselves wherever they were. It did not matter whether they stood working or were marching in a row going to work or returned to the camp. They did it because they could not do otherwise. At first they were reluctant, but later, they just didn't care anymore. They urinated in front of anyone, in front of the people who stood at the wayside, and observed the group of dead-alive Germans, in front of people who looked at the dead-alive Germans through the windows. It did not matter whether women, men, or even children looked at them. In normal times, you would have considered this exhibitionism.

This evil had severe and far-reaching consequences for the occupants of the barracks. These problems often occurred. When returning from the barracks, the workers were tired and weak. If they had the chance, they would eat something. After this, they fell on their pallets without changing their clothing, as mentioned, and would fall asleep. The exhausted men often were not aware that they were relieving themselves while they slept. What would happen to the detainee who laid on the pallet below the one laying above him on the second or third bunk to whom this happened? What should the person who peed himself do when he woke up in the morning to go to work? When could he dry his clothing and bed clothes? Don't even think about washing them. His clothing might, or might not, dry while he was wearing them. Yet, his bedding barely dried before getting wet again. Imagine the odour in the barracks. My dear reader! Try to consider how many evils this problem caused. [309] What a hopelessness and humiliation for the affected person! What physical and psychological burden for the inescapable communal life!

After the number of occupants of barracks had decreased in February 1945, the camp commander allowed me to move to a small room with some friends. My friend was agile, and very hard-working. In contrast to me, he enjoyed very good health. We both lived together in harmony. We shared everything that we had. I could always prepare our dinner before he returned from work since I could stay in the barracks. He worked at cleaning by himself. We sometimes managed to do a job together. Also, Petuchov was favourably inclined towards him. When it became warmer, Anna Sigesmundovna, a Polish woman, who was the head of the local committee of the Communist Party, wanted to build barns on her farmyard. She was looking for two workers. Our Petuchov was nice to us, and ordered my friend and me to do this job. We were glad for this. At night, we had to unload two freight cars of round timber. It took a long time to get to the train station to complete this task. We then walked to Anna Sigesmundovna's home. That prelude was not a trifling exercise. We looked forward to our new workplace since we certainly would get enough food there. We did not notice how exhausted we were when arriving at the front door of the house of this leading party official. She gave us a friendly welcome. We saw that Anna Sigesmundovna lived together with her elderly mother. The latter invited us into a small side room. There, we could sit on a low bench while the women prepared breakfast. We didn't realize what happened, but, when we woke up, we were both laying on the floor next to each other covered by a sheepskin (a so-called *tulup*) that peasants used to wear, and it was two o'clock in the afternoon! Our hosts were already finished with lunch. All of a sudden, we both leaped up to run to the door. However, Anna Sigesmundovna was already there, and spoke to us warmly, "Don't be upset! Nothing happened." We both apologized for our absence. We were confused, and also looked terrified. The elderly woman then came to the door, it seemed to us that she had something like tears in her eyes. Staying in front of us, Anna Sigesmundovna repeated, "Stay entirely calm! Nothing bad happened. Sit down." The women told us quickly what had happened. While having breakfast, we had told them that it had been difficult to roll the thick round timbers. It would have been much easier if we had had a rope. After this, our conversation had become unintelligible. The women had then noticed an odd sound, and had both hastened to the door. They saw that we both had fallen to the ground in different directions. They had shaken us a little bit, yet we both had been snoring. [210] The women had moved us together and covered us with the sheepskin. This is how we had slept. They had not wanted to wake us, but we now went to the table. They offered both of us a tiny glass of moonshine that was home-made

alcohol. We declined this offer since we were too weak to bear any alcohol. After lunch, we started to work. We were soon done with it. Jobs that appear difficult to women often turn out to be easy tasks for men. It is often the other way around too. How often we suffered from the absence of our women during our service in the Labour Army. Everyone has their own place. Ms. Anna Sigismundovna called Petuchov to inform him that we had to work for one day more. We returned to our barracks, hoping that we would go back again the next day. Yet, we did not know what we were supposed to do. We were only told that we should say to Petuchov that there was more to do.

On the following day, we arrived on time. After having breakfast, we wanted to know what we had to do. However, Anna Sigismundovna was in no hurry. She took us to a house across the street where her “brother” lived. She tried to make us believe that this person was actually her brother but we soon noticed that they were more than siblings. That wasn’t our business, we were there to work, and we were glad to get some food. The man led us to his cellar. There we were put to sorting potatoes. We became aware that the man and our benefactress did not care about our work. They simply wanted to help us get some rest. We appreciated their benevolence. We told ourselves that there were people of different convictions everywhere. These people didn’t think the same way as Petuchov.

After a couple of hours, we had finished our job. The man offered us the opportunity to take a bath in his small bathhouse. We were happy to accept his offer. When showing us how his bathhouse worked, he told us that we could take our time. We had done our job. Now we should do what we liked. He then left us alone.

What a bath! We had not taken a bath for so many years. We felt like new men. When leaving the bathhouse, we met our host. He asked us how we were feeling. He told us that our stay was not over yet. He invited us to a table. Anna Sigismundovna had already prepared a meal: Russian bacon (*salol*¹), pickled cucumbers, tomatoes, and soft bread. They sat with us at the table. The host poured liquor in all glasses saying, “To your health.” We joined them and filled our bellies. However, we declined the offer to drink another glass. Anna Sigismundovna then gave each of us a plate of Russian borsch. What a delicious dish! Anna Sigismundovna then said, “Even if it is just one sip, you need to drink a little bit more.” We did not decline her offer. After our plate had been empty and we had eaten our bread, and we had told them a little bit more about our difficult living conditions, we became very sleepy. We lay down on a good *tulup* (sheepskin) covered by another one and began to snore. [311] We fell asleep on our sheepskins at noon, and we woke up at 4 o’clock again. We stood up terrified, but we then heard a voice saying to us, “Relax! Relax!” We wanted to apologize, but the man ignored our apologies. He said, “We expected that you would have a good rest. You will benefit from it.” The man who spoke to us was the head of the local collective farm.

He was well informed about the immigration of Germans. Anna Sigismundovna also said that Germans from Germany had immigrated to Poland. They had soon acquired wealth and occupied large areas with their farms. Germans had been handworking, but they had been selfish, too. They had only cared about their own wellbeing. The state had not

¹ Cured slab of fatback with little to no meat.

mattered to them. The man agreed with her. He said that the Germans had been the same in Russia. They had not fulfilled their obligation to promote Western civilization, although they had been invited to Russia for this reason. Germans were civilized, but they barely circulated among the Russian people. They had isolated themselves from Russian society, and instead advanced their own culture by maintaining close ties with their motherland. Meanwhile, they had exploited their fellow Russians to increase their own wealth. That's why Russians had developed a hostile attitude towards Germans. However, in his opinion the current generation of Germans was not responsible for this situation. He added that the Russians had started to re-educate the Germans. He had the same view about Germans as the head of the local KGB. They both continued their discussions. Anna Sigesmundovna believed that the law of history said the present generation had to suffer for their ancestors' wrongs. I then asked her whether her opinion would not mean that an innocent generation had to accept a capital sentence? She replied, "No, I do not believe that. Times will change. I know there were many very good people among the Germans in Russia. These people are not hostile towards Russia. It would be sad if these people were destroyed."

We then shook hands in goodbye. We were glad about their kind words. Our two hosts had also filled our bags with plenty of food. They told us to come back when we struggled to survive. We said to them that we would always help them whenever they needed helping hands. We returned to our barracks with hearts full of gratitude and encouragement.

While walking home, my friend and I did not speak to each other. We were both immersed in our own thoughts. My friend finally broke the silence, "Maybe the man had a good point. I remember several incidents in my home village where Germans looked down on Russians. Yet they helped each other." We both agreed that the greed, avarice, and envy of the German-Russians had contributed to our misfortune. Both of us said that we wanted to survive, and would fight for it. When we entered the gates to our home, the supervisors were doing their patrol in the evening. We met two watchmen at the gate. One had come to replace the other. We handed a bag of tobacco over to each—their eyes were shining—and we turned to our barracks.

[312] One the following day, my friend would return to his regular work while I would go to Petuchov's house. I had not been there for three days. Raissa Ivanovna and her cow would be waiting for me. Her cow was a Russian cow that could only give 5-6 litres a day, but it was very friendly to people. The cow always greeted me when I opened the barn, and would moo for a long time. The cow sometimes even started to roar. When approaching her, the cow usually licked my jacket with its rough tongue until I scratched her neck for a little bit. Indeed, I had to go there, considering that I would have a medical appointment in Tula on the next day.

I left the barracks. On the way to Petuchov's home, I felt something that unsettled me, although I could not tell what. Both the woman and the cow gave me a warm welcome. After cleaning the barn and feeding the cow, I knocked on the front door. Mrs. Petuchov opened it, and I went inside. However, I did not feel well, but I said nothing. She had become calmer and happier since our first meeting two years ago. That did not surprise me. She had followed much of my advice. She had learned many skills, and learned to appreciate new things. But she still only tolerated her husband. I felt sorry for their

marriage. She told me that she had scolded her husband the day before mainly because of his ill treatment of German workers. For instance, he used to call them “Fritzen,” the derogatory terms for Germans, fascists—who knew what other designations he came up with. She had criticized how he had treated me. But I got the impression that her main motive was to take revenge on him since he did not support her in running the household. She now felt the urge to share her anger for her husband. That was a release for her, but I listened to it without comment. After she finished, I only said that I preferred not to be told about her issue with her husband. I also asked her not to tell her husband that she had told me. I did not feel well, and I said goodbye.

On the following day, I went to the city. It was a lovely and warm spring day. The sun and the good smelling spring air made me feel better. My medical appointment with Professor Petrov went as usual. Then he asked what I would think about removing my left eye. He could hardly spare me from this operation, but that I should consider it. It seemed to him that my condition was gradually becoming worse. I only replied that I would think about it. After this, I had my lesson with the female students. Some of them did not attend my lessons anymore, and others prepared to leave the hospital. We said goodbye. I went to the pharmacy to buy some aspirin powder. (At that time, we did not have aspirin tablets), and returned home. I decided not to go to the market that day. I did not have anything to sell. I still wasn’t feeling any better. At home I immediately went for help. My friend could not help me either. I asked myself what I should do if my health did not improve. They would not admit me to the hospital. I was worried. The next day, I even felt worse. I could not get up. I slept until noon. I did not improve. In the evening, I discussed my situation with my friend. He intended to inform Petuchov about my discomfort. That certainly might help, but I wondered what Petuchov would do.

[313] It turned out that I was wrong about Petuchov this time. After my friend had informed him about my situation, he didn’t say anything. My friend had told him that I had laid in bed and that I had not stood up. In the meantime, I was in my bed, thinking about how I could avoid going to the hospital. I had once been in the hospital when I had fallen off the ladder. They didn’t really care about Germans in the hospital, and I was afraid. Furthermore, I was worried about my eye. Was I supposed to lose it? I had experienced too much stress since my meeting with Anna Sigismundovna and her friend. I often remembered the freight car with the timber beams. I wrapped myself in my bedsheets and fell asleep. Or had I even fainted? I felt an odd coldness on my forehead, while I could not feel my legs anymore. I did not want to open my eyes since I could not see much anymore anyway. I then felt uneasy and started to dream.

I dreamt I was at home again. I saw my wife. I might have called her by her name. I then felt the coldness on my forehead. I became aware that water was running over my cheeks. I wanted to wipe it off but my hand then felt something. I might have been wrong about it. I thought it was impossible. But I heard a low voice. When I opened my eyes as much as I could I was shocked. Raissa Ivanovna stood next to my pallet, while my friend stood a little bit to the side. He had been allowed to leave work early. The “nurse,” as she had called herself, had entered the room, and introduced herself as she started doing her work. The compress did me good. I asked my nurse whether she would allow me to introduce my friend to her. My friend was surprised that I called this nurse, who he did not

know, Raissa Ivanovna. I noticed his puzzlement. I explained that I had known her for two years. He then immediately understood that the wife of our harsh supervisor was taking care of me. Raissa Ivanovna also became aware that my friend struggled to grasp the situation. She said, "I am a nurse, so I volunteered to work at the front. I wanted to help wounded people. The international law of war requires that medical practitioners need to support all people in need of help whether the wounded person belongs to our enemies or is one of us. Before our marriage my husband served as a soldier. He shot, wounded, and killed enemy soldiers. By contrast, my duty is still to take care of injured people. I know that my husband still thinks that he is at war. To this day, he is still injuring, if not destroying Germans. It is difficult for him to distinguish between our German enemies, and German-Russians. Furthermore, there are always good people. There were even good people among our German enemies." After this, Raissa Ivanovna looked straight ahead, turning her gaze away from us. Her voice was trembling. My friend said, "I think you are a good person too." I agreed. She replied, "My husband and I are quite different people. He still wants to destroy people as in war. I always say to him it is now time to protect the people who have survived. There have been so many people who died during this war!" She remained silent for a while, then continued, [314] "This is the reason we often have arguments." We then both told her not get too upset. We kept silent for a while. My friend stood a little bit to the side. Raissa sat next to the pallet where I was lying. We looked at each other from different angles, and drew our own conclusions.

All of a sudden, Raissa asked me whether the name of my wife was Katja. I looked at her and asked how she knew this. She said, "You were calling that name several times during your dream. Is this your wife's name?" I told her it was. She asked me another question, "Is your wife not German?" I knew what she was hinting, and answered, "Germans and Russians share some names. For example, we also have Ivan, Katja, Peter, Maria, Nikolai, and Lena and so forth. Germans and Russians are born under the same sun. Orientals believe that each of us is born under a specific star. We, however, think that everyone is bound to their individual fate or life path, and that we are not responsible for it. Those of us who believe in God, the supreme being, know that this is His decision. However, some people also say that men forge their own destiny."

While having this conversation, Raissa Ivanovna put fresh compresses on my forehead. I felt a bit better. She also saw the aspirin powder on my table, and gave me some. My friend brought me fresh water. I swallowed the powder with a sip.

The day would soon end, and shortly, the workers would stand in front of the entrance gate. My friend informed Raissa Ivanovna about it. Yet, she answered resolutely that she would like to see it. We both were worried about her. Considering that we knew about this young woman, we suspected that witnessing the incoming workers would evoke a response that would have a negative impact both on her married life with our supervisor, and on our own well-being. We advised her to leave before the arrival of the workers. She stubbornly reassured us that she would be smart enough to conceal her emotions at seeing the workers. In addition, she promised that subsequent events would not negatively influence the relationship between her husband and us. During our discussion, the workers already arrived at the entrance gate. The watchman opened the double leaves. Looking through our window, you were able to see what was happening. Raissa Ivanovna positioned herself in

the front of the window so that nothing would escape her attention. We could closely observe the movements of her face, and sense what was happening in her soul, her disenchantment. She heard her husband shouting and swearing at the workers. She saw his gestures, and how he seized individual workers, and put them in front of the workers to yell at them. [315] He used swearwords that censors would never allow. He then took them back into the rows of workers, making them stumble so that they fell. Sometimes their colleagues were able to catch them, but others fell to the ground. People next to them had to set them on their feet. Raissa Ivanovna witnessed firsthand how her husband treated the starving and helpless people while standing behind a barred gate on a square surrounded by barbed wire. We both noticed how the innocent face of the nurse changed. Her face grew pale, then red. In the meantime, her eyes became wider, and then almost slits. Likewise, the smooth skin of her forehead changed. First, it became broad and flat, and then full of deep wrinkles. We also observed how she agonized with a contorted face. First, she pressed her lips together so that they turned blue. Later, she also pressed her teeth together so that they crackled.

After this scene of torture was over, and the mistreated had left, our “hero” stretched a little bit, pushed out his chest, and lit a cigarette. She also saw this image, seeing how her husband placed himself up tall. Usually, you would not mind if a soldier did that. Then he exited the gate and took the direction towards home. She saw how he headed toward the city centre. The poor woman stood at the window frame, leaning her forehead on it for a second, thunderstruck. She turned to us. We saw tears running over her cheeks. She put her face in her hands, and sat down on a small box next to the window. We had remained silent the whole time. When she regained her composure, she approached me, and asked how I was doing. She then shook our hands, and said goodbye. My friend, who had a harsh personality, said to her, “Raissa Ivanovna, you wanted to see what happens here. Things won’t change. You are agitated. But since you are here, you should also go to the dining halls to take a look at the big one, and the small one.” She replied, “I have not thought about this. I will do it. Thank you.” After these words, she left our room. While doing so, she said, “Tomorrow I will come back. Get healthy again soon, David Ivanovich.

We looked at each other. I wondered how this woman had learned that I was ill and what did it mean that Mrs. Petuchov had visited a dirty “Fritz”? My friend assumed that her husband had told her about it when returning home for lunch. That morning, my friend had informed Petuchov about my illness and asked him to let him off work early. Petuchov had signaled his permission without saying anything. Anyway, this was not the most important issue. We wanted to know what would happen next. We admired this young woman. She did not suit her husband at all. He did not deserve her. She would not be able to live with such a tyrant for very long.

The following day started as usual. My fever had retreated. I prepared tea (without tea), in other words, I boiled water. I cut the bread crust from my bread and crumbled it into my water. I had to convince myself that I boiled milk with zwieback. That was my breakfast. [316] In the afternoon Raissa Ivanovna came. I was doing much better but I still lay under my blanket. She asked me about my condition. I told her that my fever was weaker than the previous day. She replied that she wanted to have another look. I understood what she had in mind however I was uncertain about her main intention. I was worried about it. My

friend returned to the barracks. He was worried as well. When the workers stood at the entrance gate again, Raissa Ivanovna did the same as the day before. Things happened pretty much the same, only she remained calmer while observing the events. Petuchov again turned left to leave, and not right. Raissa Ivanovna then went to the dining hall. We did not know what she wanted to see and do there. We were not interested in learning more about her intentions. We did not want to get ourselves into trouble. We did not want to be responsible if something happened. Her actions seemed odd to us.

On the following day, there was a surprise for us. Soon after breakfast, Petuchov entered our room together with a man and a child. I immediately recognized the man. He was a German. He worked as a plasterer, and whitewashed walls with chalk. Petuchov said that he and his daughter could move to this room, and he should go to work the next day.

After Petuchov had left, the man told us that his wife had died in Kazakhstan so that his child, Maria, had become a half-orphan. He had asked for permission to be released from the camp, to let him return home. But they had only allowed him to pick up the child, and return to the work camp. That was his current situation. He did not know what to do with the child. He had no idea how to live here with a child. I comforted the man by saying that I would take care of the child during the day so he could go to work without worry. He only had to ask for food stamps and bedclothes for the child. We arranged everything until that evening. When my friend returned home, he was surprised by the events, but soon grasped the situation. From that day on, all four of us lived in the room together.

The girl was colourful. At five years old, she wasn't shy at all. Yet, she was also obedient, and well behaved. We liked the girl from the first day. Likewise, the girl soon trusted us. Because of her, one of the camp medical assistants who was also a German began to visit us frequently. His surname was Klein. Back home, he had worked as assistant to an army surgeon, and was able to give first aid. Furthermore, he was a nice man. He stayed in the camp since he was not healthy, or a young man anymore.

My health ceased to be critical, but my fever only gradually disappeared. At that time, I only went to the city to see Professor Petrov once a week. I was unable to decide whether they should remove my left eye. I did not have much pain, but somehow the eyeball hurt. The excretion of pus did not lessen, and the right eye was being affected. My eyesight gradually weakened. Would I become blind? I had not gone to the Petuchovs' house for some time. [317] I had not seen Mrs. Petuch for a week, and I wondered whether I would ever meet her again. She had witnessed the brutality committed by her husband at the end of the workday two days in a row. She had probably seen the ill treatment of the inmates in the dining hall as well. In doing so, she had familiarized herself with all cruelties done by her husband in the camp, and at the workplace. Nonetheless, there were no changes. The hopes of my friend and myself turned out to be futile. The food situation of the detainees was less of a concern at that time because the men could harvest additional plants.

The child who lived with us was my only psychological support. Did we live? No, "live" is not the proper word; it is more appropriate only to say that we existed. However, the child did not care about word choices. Whenever you asked her how she was doing, most of the time she would reply, "I am not hungry." When Maria talked about her life,

she often repeated the same things. The people around them had spoken a different language than her mother had, and she spoke so that they could not be understood. They had barely anything to eat. One day, her mother did not wake up. People had rolled her in a blanket, put her into a hole, and covered it with soil. The family that had consisted of three persons had been deported to a small Russian village in Kazakhstan. The villagers had been very poor. Her mother had been unable to speak Russian. After her husband had been sent to the Labour Army, his wife had perished by starvation. Yet, the child had survived. She now lived with her father among Germans who spoke the same language as her mother. The “uncles” treated little Maria well, but her father never wanted to tell them what had exactly happened to her. She could not remember life outside the camp. The child had enough to eat, and she had not learned to desire other food. All the people around her spoke like her father and mother so she felt good. One time, the child hopped on one leg, the other time on two legs. She sometimes even laughed. However, that did not happen too often since none of us was in a frolicking mood. The child had not learned how to be happy yet. That was the situation.

One day at the beginning of April, the local head of the KGB, Tereschtschenko, ordered Petuchov to inform me that I should visit him. Upon my arrival, he did not immediately recognize me. He then asked me how I was doing, whether my health would improve. I then told him that the professor insisted on removing my left eye. Tereschtschenko got a little bit startled, and said, “Then there seems no hope for improvement.” I was interested in having a long conversation with him so I stayed silent. He then asked me about the situation in the detention camp. I got the impression that he already knew the answer to this question, only seeking confirmation. I gradually became confident that I was supposed to affirm some facts. I now remembered Raissa Ivanovna. I assume that she had sparked this inquiry. There was no other person who could have done it. When he asked me out of the blue whether I wrote letters to my family or other people, I had no doubt anymore. Raissa Ivanovna had sent him an anonymous report about what she had witnessed at the camp. Tereschtschenko now wanted to find out who wrote the report. It was clear to me that I should not disclose what Raissa Ivanovna had done. In general, I should speak about camp life as little as possible. [318] I replied to him, “No, I have not been writing or reading anything for a long time. My eyesight is too weak.” Tereschtschenko wanted to know many more things, but I refused to satisfy his curiosity. He asked me about our living and working conditions. I replied that all officials in charge of the camp could visit it to witness how camp life was, including the kitchen and dining hall. I reassured him that I did not know about the working condition at the construction site since I had not worked there for two years. Talking about myself, I said that I only fought to survive. He responded to my harsh answer in an aggressive manner. I told him the living condition of the camp hadn’t changed. I would probably follow the fate of many Germans. I was supposed to endure in this life. Otherwise, the situation would have already changed. In fact, it could have very easily been improved. My boss was alarmed. He wanted to comfort me with assurances that the situation would not remain the same forever. I replied, “I do not doubt that at all. However, people who held that hope have already perished.” Our conversation was over. He shook my hand, and left his office. I wondered why we had had this meeting.

Some days later, Petuchov entered our room when I was alone. The men had gone to work, and Maria visited Klein. It seemed to me that Petuchov was in a sad state. Our

conversation had not really begun when he asked me whether Raissa Ivanovna had been here. I replied, "Yes, indeed. That was more than one week ago. At that time, I had lain in bed because I had a fever. He asked me whether she had complained about him. I gave him a brief answer, "There is no reason to suspect that I would discuss your married life. That is none of my business." He said, "I wasn't suggesting that. But she has gone away without telling me. She sold the cow and some other things before leaving. I do not know where she went. I do not know her relatives, or where they live. She is also not going to come back. She wrote a note saying that I should not search for her, and that our relationship is over." I knew why she had left him, but I only said, "You were not compatible anyway. You will find another wife." He kept silent. He then said, "There is nothing I can do about it," and left.

I sat in my semi-dark room, reflecting on the situation. I thought Raissa Ivanovna had felt too weak to fight openly against her Peter, his ill treatment of the detainees, or the injustices that were occurring in our camp. Instead, she sent a report about the situation to the local head of the KGB, left her husband, and ran away since she did not love him. We expected that more things would happen in the aftermath of this event. We would soon see.

On the following day, the local head of the KGB and Petuchov visited me. They had not much to discuss with me. Tereschtschenko informed me that I should go to the committee for prisoners tomorrow. Petuchov added that I should prepare myself to go to the local hospital at 9 am. I would obtain all the necessary documents. Both said goodbye to me and left our room. [319] I saw that my life story would go on. The meeting with the committee for prisoners did not take long. The important thing was the decision of my professor Petrov. He confirmed that I was incapable of working. Therefore, I was allowed to quit the Labour Army. After the meeting concluded, ten of us German detainees were informed that we would be sent home in about three days. That happened on April 14, 1945.

Next day, I went to the city to see my professor. He had a friendly greeting, and asked me how I was doing. I then told him that I was declared to be incapable of working the previous day. In a few days, I could travel to my family. He congratulated me, and encouraged me. I thanked him and the nurses, and left Prof. Petrov's hospital for the last time. I quickly ran to the market to buy food for the journey. I spent all the money I had. I only packed the things I needed. My other belongings I left at the camp. Three days later, we received our travel documents. My friend accompanied me to the train station. I cannot remember having a farewell that was sadder than the one from my friend. During our walk to the main station, he told me that he had met Raissa Ivanovna before she had gone away. She revealed that she had written a report to the KGB. Consequently, Petuchov would be replaced. She told my friend that she had had enough of her husband. She thought he was a bad person, and also that he had not been faithful to her. She had waited for him at the dining hall of the camp. On this occasion, she had seen him walking with another woman to the dining hall. They had eaten together there. She just wanted to forget about him. On her passport, she still had maintained her maiden name, therefore, she did not have to divorce him. She could just leave him. She had not told me about her plan so that I would not have known anything about it if Petuchov had asked. Consequently, I would not have any responsibility. She had asked my friend to give me her regards. I should be reassured

that she would never forget David Ivanovich, who had helped her so much. I had been like a father to her.

I was happy that the young woman had dared to make a new start. At this point, she was a 19 years old nurse. During the three or four years of her suffering, she had learned a lot. She was a good person. I was sure that she would be able to re-establish herself.

While leaving the work camp, I thought how many detainees had not survived this hell. We had been 700 men at the beginning of our stay. Only 300 were left. Several fathers, brothers, and sons would not see their families again. I wondered whether a person like Petuchov would ever feel bad about the suffering and pain he had caused, and could have prevented.

Yet, I now sat in the rail carriage that would bring us to our families. I had survived the war by only a hair's breadth.

The travel went well. On April 18, I stepped off the train at the station in Slavgorod. At that time my family lived in a village of Gnadenheim where my wife worked at a poor collective farm. My parents-in-law were involved in the collective farm as well. They barely had any food. My wife had baked something for me. I did not know what to call it. It consisted of the skins of legume that had been separated from the peas for porridge. [320] I had brought some things home but it barely an improvement. My family and I looked at each other several times—we were hardly able to recognize each other. My wife, my two sons, and my parents-in-law had become skinny. They looked gray, weak and poor. Looking at my family I saw that the war was not over for them although it had ended for me. I had returned to my family, but the war at the front continued. We all still had to bear the war with just enough food to fill our bellies. We had to get more food. Where would we get it? And how?

Going from Slavgorod to Gnadenheim, you pass a settlement called Halbstadt. The name is telling¹. The settlement was neither a town nor a village. At that time, there were many German villages in the area of Slavgorod. Many Germans, Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics had left the European part of Russian to settle down there because of a shortage of land before the beginning of the October Revolution. After the revolution, the German settlement formed an administrative district as a result of Lenin's approach towards nationalities. Back then, they had established and fostered Halbstadt as the centre of the district. Here, there were no farmers. Apart from the administrative buildings, the town had a steam mill, middle school, hospital, grocery shop, pharmacy, veterinarian, and weather station. In addition to this, there were boarding schools of different types, and they also had an excellent Machine Tractor Station (MTS) complete with workshops. It was one of the biggest in Siberia. At that time, my brother Gerhard worked there as an electrical mechanic as well. I learned about it from people who knew my brother well in Slavgorod.

On my way from Slavgorod, I had paid a visit to my brother. I wanted to greet him, and afterwards, then go on to Gnadenheim to get to my own family. While staying at my

¹ Halbstadt literally means half a town.

brother's workshop, the director of the MTS (named Tschertovskich Alexej Ivanovich) came by. When he saw me, he asked who I was, and wanted to know what I could do, where my family lived, and how they were doing. He said, "Your brother is a teacher like you. However, we are urgently looking for specialists for our MTS right now. Come to work here tomorrow! You will work as a supervisor of our workshop for technical equipment. You can live in a beautiful, empty house. You will have a good salary. We will also support you in getting food." He then ordered his housekeeper to prepare a carriage to pick up my family and our belonging so that we could move there. My brother encouraged me to be optimistic about this opportunity. That was the best way of establishing oneself in this area. Then I went to my family. This was the solution to the problems we faced in Gnadenheim already prepared beforehand.

I brought my family to the new place and settled them there. I began to work at my section in the workshop. However, a military man called on me. He introduced himself as a commander. [321] He informed me that I had broken the law since I had relocated my family from Gnadenheim to Halbstadt without asking for his consent. However, we were able to fix this because of my ignorance of the law, and with the support of my boss. They explained that a commander controlled the Germans who had been relocated from the European Russia to Siberia, not the local population. We had a special status. We would have to ask for the commander's permission if we wanted to go five kilometres away from our home for any length of time. The administration had to approve the relocation of my family and me. Apart from this, all members of our families from the age of 15 were obligated to report to the commander once a month to sign in. Furthermore, the commander had to know about our occupations, and approve any employment changes because there were some fields of work in which German deportees were not permitted to work. We had to file a written petition to change our employment, and the commander had to give written approval for each employment change. Otherwise, we enjoyed the same right as normal Soviet citizens. I wondered how many rights we still had. That was contingent on the caprices of the Soviet government. Romans 13:2 applied to us, "Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement."

The War Ends

May 9, 1945 was a joyful day. You could see happiness and joy on every face. They cherished, "The war is over. We have won." At the same time, the Russian-Germans wondered, "When will we eventually have peace?" An armistice or peace agreement is not the same for everyone. We deportees had to wait much longer until we had peace. For some of us, the following ten post-war years were even worse than wartime. Our wellbeing was mainly dependent on the commanders who were in charge of us. It was not easy to gain their favour. The commanders were Petuchov's fellows.

The War Continues

No, the war was not over for us at all. We had to suffer for ten more years. The higher administration hired front-line soldiers for commanders, men who were likely to have a hostile attitude towards Germans, or any person who acted on their own initiative. In their districts, they exercised extensive power over the German deportees. Legally speaking, they were bound to the orders of the higher administration. However, commanders had to know how to read between the lines. In reality, you were subjected to the caprices of these sadists. They could harass us as much they liked. A man called P. Kotov (literally “tomcat”) was appointed as the commander of the district of Halbstadt. Our fate rested with him. His character matched his name, and he was eager to live up to it, especially considering that he inherited his “tomcat character” from his father. His ancestors had imbued him with the traits of a tomcat. [322] Yes, his tomcat father was eager to make his son a true tomcat. He was an old and experienced tomcat, and his son was excellent in following him. He could even act more like a tomcat than his father due to the power that the KGB gods had bestowed upon him.

Alas, how much this tomcat scratched us. If you wanted to visit your sisters or parents who lived a little more than five kilometres from you, you had to file a written petition some weeks in advance. P. Kotow used to exploit the deportees for his own benefit and pleasure any who wanted to meet during the waiting period. If you had the opportunity to get a better position, P. Kotow would prolong the administrative process until your new employer would hire someone else. In particular, he enjoyed being sadistic toward women. He especially displayed his tomcat character when dealing with them. He did not care much about whether he had to deal with girls or women, married or unmarried. The poor women had no choice. Only those who had to suffer from these cynical measurements against deportees can genuinely understand how harmful they were. In the period of the Labour Army (1940-1945), Russian Germans had to suffer physically. They hungered, broke down, starved to death, and lost family members. In the ten-year-long period of post-war detention (1945-1956), the surviving and newborn Germans had to suffer tremendously to the degree of psychological extinction. They lost their mother tongue, German customs and habits, sense of culture, traditional German family structures, and their entire German character. The Germans who had been deported from European Russia had to experience the full hatred of the Russian population for 15 years (1940-1956). This hatred has also extended to many following generations of Russian Germans. We do not know when this hatred will stop. This hatred has not only resulted from the war between Germans and Russian. It goes back to the 18th century when Germans immigrated to Russia. In the course of two centuries, this hatred had been growing. I wonder whether we have already reflected enough on the question of the degree to which we sparked and nourished this hatred against us. Did we suffer for no reason? I will elaborate later.

I did not have a high position at the MTS for very long. My eyes that had improved, worsened again. I had to go to the hospital. Once more, my misfortune turned out to be in my favour. Some doctors, decent people, learned that I was a teacher. Their support helped

me to work at a school again.¹ [323] In an earlier time, the school of Halbstadt had been exemplary. It had been a big, beautiful school building compared with others. However, now the building was used as a granary. Classes took place in a dormitory in the backyard of the school. Anyway, they still had seven classes. I was the first male teacher who joined the teaching staff since the war. As a result, I had to take on tasks that were not related to teaching since there was such a shortage of male labour at that time. I did not mind repairing a stove now and then. In so doing, it would again be warm in our classroom both physically and psychologically. I also sometimes had to fix a windowpane, or a door hook. We began preparing evening activities for the pupils. The teaching staff presented songs. I had to teach different subjects since we did not offer parallel classes—math, geography, and science. I needed some time to prepare for teaching this variety of subjects considering that I had forgotten some things during the five years I had not taught. However, it went well, and we were a good-tempered and united team. Later, my brother Gerhard also started to work at the school. He specialized in physics and chemistry. Although we were a good team, the administration was suspicious of us because most teachers were German. So, they hired some Russian teachers, including the wife of our commander. Moreover, his father became the custodian of the school. This is how unity among the teachers faded. Mistrust, envy and hostility became prevalent among teachers and pupils. A dangerous situation emerged. In the meantime, I was appointed as head of the school. Unsurprisingly, that added to the envy that some of my Russian colleagues felt. Why should a German deportee turn out to be a winner of the war? I perceived this situation as humiliating and dangerous. Fortunately, I benefited from the fact that I had been trained as a language teacher for Russian schools at an institution of higher education. Without asking my commander for consent, the higher administration appointed me to work in Soloneshnoye². This was a Russian school with ten grades, and I was the only specialized foreign language teacher.

This was a comfortable position I held for 15 years. I was a productive teacher. The locals were nice good natured. There was still a shortage of bread since the entire grain harvest had to be delivered to the government. However, there were many potatoes. We had our own cow and sheep. Later, we also had pigs and rabbits. So, we didn't to worry about being hungry. The school was big. There were parallel classes. We were the only German family in the village. Likewise, only a few German families lived in the nearby villages where a large number of pupils lived. We enjoyed good living conditions in this village. We built our own home and had our own kitchen garden that reached to the lake. We were well off, but we were not free. The administration did not trust us. We were subjects of a commander. Also, my son Reinhard had to go to the KGB every month to sign a document. [324] When Reinhard was 20, he was a good-looking, strong, tidy, and trustful young man. In general, his peers respected him, but hadn't considered him as one of their own. He was "politically unreliable," and the KGB kept an eye on him. Everyone knew about it. The boys did not care much. By contrast, the girl took it more seriously. Reinhard was a good musician, and was often invited to attend youth gatherings. However, he soon noticed that he was supposed to serve his peers, whereas he was never served by

¹ *Written on the left margin:* During the time of detention, my mother passed away. She died at Liese's home in Stepnoje.

² About 450 km from Halbstadt. 51°39'N 84°19'E

them. At times, he also heard people call him “Fritz.” Although this swearword was not always targeted against him, he thought that he had to be cautious. Our son always had a balanced attitude toward us. He appeared to be happy, and seemed to be an optimist. We did not notice that the arbitrary humiliations of the political administration damaged him to the degree that he would break down. The time came when his best friends were drafted. In other words, the state entrusted the defense of their motherland to them. By doing this, the state expressed its trust, its belief that they would defend and protect their motherland. However, my son was told that he was not allowed to serve in the military since he was German. That made it obvious that he was not considered to be reliable or trustworthy. That was too much for him. We, parents, had not anticipated this. We had not noticed his inner struggles. We did not help him, and his friends had left. He had to cope with his pain all alone, and he did not manage it. He chose instead to die. On May 6 1951, he shot a self-made bullet through his own heart. We found his body at the bank of the lake. He left a farewell letter behind in which he explained the reason for his suicide. He had given up hope of ever living freely. Not everyone is able to cope, overcoming inferiority. If a man is forbidden to defend his motherland, he will not have a motherland. If a man does not have a homeland, he will lose the most valuable good that he and his family can acquire. You cannot expect everyone to survive that loss. Some people cannot cope.

Thinking about our role as parents, we were aware that it must be the highest parental duty and concern to protect their children against misfortune. However, not everyone can sense the critical moments when children are heading for disaster, only steps away from plunging to ruin. This is especially difficult when they have never experienced such a situation. In spite of that, there is no excuse for parents for not having saved their child. Some other people might forgive them, but they will never be able to forgive themselves, to soothe their conscience. Doubts will always remain. Why? What is the reason? We answer that if I had done this or that it would not have happened. Alas, I could have dealt with the situation differently. And so forth. You do not stop thinking about your child’s suicide. Maybe, you will do it forever. There is an Eastern adage that says, “A conscience is like one thousand judges.” One of these judges will speak to you, for sure. You will never be able to silence the quiet mumblings of these voices.

[325] On December 31, 1956, we learnt that the restrictions on Germans in the Soviet Union would be removed. However, this process made it obvious for the first time how our government had fooled the Germans in 1940. At that time, they had said that the Germans would have to be evacuated. The order of removing restrictions stated that the Germans had no right to return to their home to regain their former properties. This, finally, was the truth. The Russians’ aim had not been to protect the life of Germans but to annihilate them, and those who would survive would be enslaved. They imposed precautionary measures to prevent the surviving Germans from returning to their homes or from regaining their properties. In other words, the Russians intended to destroy and bereave the German-Russians. Wartime provided them with the most suitable opportunity to carry out this plan under the guise of evacuating the Germans for their own safety. The scheme that Tsar Nicolas II had envisioned for dealing with the Germans in 1912 was executed by the Communists in 1940. Nicolas II had planned the same scheme before the beginning of the First World War. Yet he, at least, had not lied.

You might wonder why the Russians did not allow the Germans to emigrate, considering they did not want to have us any longer? A short answer to this question would be that the circumstances had changed. However, I am going to elaborate on this question later.

At that time, I continued to work at the middle school in Soloneshnoye. I enjoyed my work, and was successful. The local population was pleasant, and offered to help. The fate of our son left a deeply shocked impression on the normal population while the administration officials felt disillusionment. They ceased to bother us with the monthly signature. We gradually recovered from the shock caused by the loss of our son. The years flew by. Our second son, David Toews, finished the tenth grade very successfully. In 1958, he began to study at the medical institute in Barnaul, the capital of the Altai district. In 1965, he finished school. He was 23 when he obtained a medical degree.

In 1959, we also moved to Barnaul to support our son in getting food and housing¹. We also wanted to make him feel at home, so we moved one year after him. We bought a small house that we renovated so that we could live in a good two-storey house. In this way, we created good conditions for our son's medical training. He was always thankful for this. Before finishing his degree, he married a student who studied at the same institute. She also became an excellent doctor. We had the pleasure of taking in our arms their first daughter, our grandchild. They lived and ate with us. We enjoyed the presence of our son and daughter-in-law very much, but we especially enjoyed our grandchild. We were lucky to have strong family relationships based on mutual trust. We were fortunate to take care of our children until they reached physical and mental maturity, and finished their education. In 1967, they were able to move out of the parental home. They now had the strength to build their own.

[326] I also benefited from the atmosphere in Barnaul. When moving to the city in 1959, I got a teaching position in one of the best schools in Barnaul. I worked as a handicraft teacher. Later, I changed my position, and became a German teacher at the same school. On the school's recommendation, I was invited to Altai Institute for the Professionalization of Teachers in the Altai District. As part of the management and development of the Soviet educational system, this educational institute had the reputation of being a leader in the development of teaching methods for all subjects in ten-grade schools, called middle schools in the Soviet Union.

I was in charge of two task forces: one developed teaching methods for handicraft education; and the other for German language teaching. I had a relatively large library at my disposal where I had the opportunity to study things that I had not been able to learn during my youth. I managed to learn about the many developments in teaching methods in the Soviet Union and abroad. My theoretical understanding expanded. I was allowed to visit all schools of the large Altai district to observe and judge the practical effects that implementations of different teaching methods had. I attended classes of my expertise. In addition to this, one of my main tasks was to support teachers who worked in challenging circumstances for improving and advancing their pedagogic work. I also had to identify

¹ 53°20'N 83°45'E

the teachers who needed further theoretical instructions at an institute. This meant I had to organize and conduct a two-to-three-month long course for them at our institute. That was my second task. I had to give some of the lectures for these courses taking place during school holidays. It was demanding work to provide high-quality and well-thought-out lectures based on teaching practices at schools. I had to test teaching methods, and attend hundreds of lessons taught at different schools. This meant that I had to travel a lot to visit schools. I had the opportunity to meet many teachers. I got to know many people in school administration, and saw how they ran the schools. Consequently, I was able to consider their problems, and communicate their demands and needs to the higher administration.

My work at the institute was varied, and posed various challenges. I was busy the entire day, every day, and I was often not at home. I was distanced from my family who missed me, and felt sad. I missed them all the more. The size of my achievements, my work system and rhythm, my energy, the initiatives that I managed to realize—all these gave me two significant benefits. Firstly, I was able to strengthen my willingness to work through my industriousness. At the same time, my big workload, and good work performance helped me to enlarge my capacity to work. As a final result of this, I became able to process an increasing amount of information and practices. I saved many experiences mentally in my brain. In this way, I became indispensable, so to speak. For a German, that was an essential achievement.¹ [327] My position became secure. Secondly, I could avoid activities with political implications since I was always busy with my immediate duties. Politics were not my business. That was how we were supposed to be. As a result, I succeeded in convincing the administration of my loyalty. Gaining trust was very crucial for a German at that time. (Obviously, they could not know what I was thinking.)

I endeavored to not be demanding. I was always ready to step in whenever they had to replace someone who did something related to my work or my competencies. I was willing to be helpful even if it turned against me. I ignored ingratitude toward me. It was not appropriate to be resentful or sensitive. By contrast, you always had to be invulnerable and patient. I had to bear some humiliation. I displayed the attitude that the Russians expected from us Germans, especially in this dark time. You had to swallow all the bitter pills in order to survive. I thank my Lord that he provided me with the resilience to do this at all times. That is the answer to the question that I have often been asked, “How did you manage to emerge unscathed? How did you get through hard times?”

I will only raise one other point. Indeed, I got through hard times; however, it is not entirely true that I remained unscathed. When I turned 60 in 1959, I was physically exhausted and had to use a walking stick, although 60 is not a great age. I was tired and overworked. In the course of the last years, I had experienced several breakdowns. I had to

¹ *Written on the left margin:* Our children stayed two years more at our home. We lived together peacefully. Yet, we had deep, permanent worries. How would their marriage turn out? We could often witness that mixed marriage had proven to be complicated. I once asked my son why he had not fallen in love with a German girl. He then explained to me that Russian girls were looking for German husbands. German husbands can dodge behind their Russian wife. By contrast, German women marry Russian men. As a result, German surnames are disappearing.

lie in hospital for several weeks because of nerve inflammation, and suffered many pains. There I had more than 400 injections within three months. Such a one-sided treatment had a negative impact on my heart. The only way to recover was by having months of rest. Therefore, I decided to stop working and apply for retirement. At that time, retirees could get no more than 120 rubles (350 deutschmarks). I had worked as a teacher for 40 years (including the years I served in the Labour Army). They now calculated that I would receive a pension of 112 rubles together with my wife. We owned a good and beautiful home in the city. We were relatively well off. Our children were certified doctors who had good positions, and did not depend on us. We were supposed to be content with our life! And we were content, indeed.

There was only one problem in the marriage of our son. David's wife, Lyudmila, was a relaxed person, an excellent doctor (an internist), but she was not German. We were irritated by the idea that there would be no Toews of Russian descent. In the Soviet Union, children inherited their nationality from their mother. In unclear cases, children could choose their nationality after turning 16 and getting their first passports. Obviously, the choice of children depends on the nationality in which their families raise the children. That posed the question of whether the young parents chose a Russian or German education for their children. We now saw how much the younger generation had been affected by the 15 years of deportation. At that time, everything that was German had been intentionally destroyed: language, customs, traditions, economy, religion and mindset.¹ [328] The Soviet administration, not the vast majority of the local Russian population, was willing to accept the influence of very nationalistic groups, including very impressive persons, and not to counteract them at all, even though the administration did not fuel the ethnic hatred between Germans and Russians. But the attitude of the administration paved the way for local despots and tormentors. Germans were subjected to all possible forms of humiliation. The perpetrators insulted them by calling them "Fritz." They pointed at them, or ridiculed them because of their German peculiarities. They laughed at them because of their way of speaking Russian, or they derided Germans who revealed their nationality by their customs or clothes. It is particularly difficult for children to cope with humiliation due to their heritage. German children felt ashamed of speaking German to each other. They prevented their classmates from noticing their descent by speaking poor German like them. The German children and teenagers tried to learn to speak good Russian as quickly as possible to conceal their nationality. If a German and a Russian went to court, the German would be found guilty. Considering that only a few Germans worked in a group most of the time, the reward was distributed among the group members so that the German would get the least of all. It did not matter whether the German had worked the most. Germans had to take the lowest paid jobs. In such circumstances, people felt pressured to assimilate. One of the few means of survival, if not the only one was to adapt to Russian society.

At the time when my son courted Lyudmila, we once asked him why he had not fallen in love with a German girl considering that many German girls studied at the medical institute as well. He then explained that German girls tried to get married Russian men so that they could conceal their German descent, whereas the German boys were interested in

¹ *Written on the left margin:* Lyudmila did not turn out to be a good daughter-in-law or child. She remains Russian. She will never be German.

Russian women. I then asked him whether the German men who wanted to dodge behind a Russian woman were aware that they might do a disservice to them. My son replied, "There are also German men willing to adopt the women's family name." (Such change of names is legal in Russian, especially in these cases.) Then I asked whether he intended to adopt the family name of his future wife, namely Gortschenko. He answered this question in the negative, considering that the name Toews did not clearly indicate German descent in contrast to family names like Neufeld or Bergmann. For German men, marrying a Russian woman was like a sort of rehabilitation. [329] My son thought that this was sufficient for him. He considered adopting the wife's last name as an expression of contempt for his father's family name. That was too much for him. He deemed that behaviour to be a treasonous. We had to admit that our son's marriage to a Russian worried us.

What could we do about this? Our experiences with our son Reinhard cause us to remain silent. Of course, we warned David that his decision could turn out to be fateful. We told him that mixed marriages often caused difficulties with possibly very negative impacts on their children. He only needed to remember his Aunt Sarah. However, my son was able to counter this last objection. He said, "Have you not always told me that my Aunt Sarah had talented and well-behaved children?" Indeed, he was right about this. He countered with genetics. We gave up on this debate. Looking at his two grownup children, we have to admit that these children are fine, too. They are gifted, hardworking, obedient, and confident. We have grown very fond of our two grandchildren, Svetlana (a Russian name) and Eduard (a German name). They also have been very attached to their grandparents. However, they did not grow up German, and that hurt us a lot. At the moment, we live in West Germany while they live in Russia. We believe that the mistrust between German and Russians will be replaced by trust, and that enmity will turn into a true friendship. We wish and hope that we will soon have a closer relationship with our children and grandchildren. We hope that they will be willing to have it, too.

Working too much at the institute wasn't the only reason for physical decline. The harsh Siberian climate, and the long cold winter also harmed our health. We wanted to move to a warmer location where the children and grandchildren could sunbathe, where the warmth offered fruit trees, flowers and vineyards. In doing so, the condition of my radiculitis could improve, while the women's legs could finally heal from their open wounds. We decided to move to Central Asia. In fact, thousands of Germans who had lived in Siberia had already moved there. Some of our relatives and friends lived in the town of Tokmok, 60 kilometres away from the Kyrgyzstan capital Bischkek.

Upon our arrival in Tokmok¹ in the summer of 1969, we bought a small house with a garden. We had lived in Barnaul for ten years. We expected to live in Tokmok for at least that long. What we did not know was that Tokmok was the last Russian town where we would live. By Russian standards, we did very well. Our house was beautiful, bright and warm. It was located in the middle of the garden that provided us with many fruits (apples, cherries, plums and grapes) and vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, radishes and carrots). We kept pigs, chickens and rabbits. I made incubators, and bred chicks and

¹ 42°50'N 75°17'E

ducklings, selling them for a good income. Much more meaningful for me was my hobby working at the workbench and vice. [330] During my entire childhood and professional life as a teacher I had never lacked a workbench or vice. Without pursuing this hobby, I would not have been able to teach for 40 years. A person needs relaxing hours when doing unnerving pedagogic work. There is nothing more relaxing than spending an hour at the workbench or vice. Switching between intellectual work, and physical labour is good for both soul and body. In addition, I could get some supplemental income through my handcraftsmanship. Our grandchildren spent every summer at our home. By spending time in warm, if not hot Kyrgyzstan they were able to recover from the long Siberian winter. Yes, it was 30°– 40°C every day during a Kyrgyz summer. In the first years, that weather was good for us. We had been frozen too often in the Altai region. My radiculitis occurred less frequently while my wife's legs healed with scarring. We thought that we had found the right place for us, and wanted to stay there. Our children, especially our grandchildren, benefitted from spending three to four months in a warm climate. But after five or six years, we noticed that the heat had a devastating impact on our hearts. I could handle the heat relatively well but Katja began to suffer from it. She gradually began having headaches and precordial catch syndrome¹, the symptoms of which could become chronic. We tried to take action against hyperthermia during the hottest months (June through August). We tried to create a sort of artificial night from noon to 4 pm by shading the rooms of our house with window shutters. Then we rested. We could do this for some time, but our grandchildren stayed with us during these months, and they did not like having such a long dinner nap. At the same time, it was also too hot for them. The heat went from being a cure to being a problem. My wife began to suffer more and more. Some people left Kyrgyzstan.

For everything there is a season; nothing remains the same in this world. Everything is moving and changing. For a certain period of time, my grandchildren liked to spend the summer with us, and they enjoyed everything that a warm country like Kyrgyzstan offered: sun's heat, fruits, vegetables, watermelons, grapes, and having long walks hand in hand with their grandparents. For the winter, they returned home to play in the snow for six or seven months. They then enjoyed skiing, sledding, ice skating, building snowmen, and so forth. Certainly, that had been a good, healthy and varied way of life for ten years. But now? Our garden and yard had been big enough for small children. They now felt that it was too small for them. They wanted to go onto the street, to the market or cinema. They found our short walks through the pastures along the river too short. They had already explored the pastures too often. They knew it too well. Our grandchildren wanted to learn more about the world. The world is a big and beautiful place, isn't it? Yes, the world is beautiful, indeed. Unfortunately, the world is not only beautiful, but also nasty and dangerous.

[231] We grandparents, started to feel that destinations we walked to hand in hand with our little grandchildren were too far away; when older, they felt those same places were too close. Before, our grandchildren felt safe when walking hand in hand with their grandparents so that they only fell on the ground a few times or didn't get lost in a big crowd. But now they wanted to walk faster, while their grandparents began to have difficulties walking, and had to slow their pace. Also, the older grandchildren did not feel

¹ Symptoms are stabbing heart pains.

the need to walk hand in hand any longer with their grandparents. They wanted to walk on their own, and walk farther. They did not think that their grandparents needed to watch them. They told us they wouldn't get lost. The things our grandchildren had enjoyed and valued between the age of five and ten turned into boring, trifling stuff. Likewise, they ceased to be fascinated by our stories. They had made their own experiences, or had read about them. They were now ten and 15 years old. Was this an unnatural development? Of course not. It was exactly the opposite, a very natural development. We were happy to see them grow up, and experience their growth. The converse is being taken by people in their seventies. Every year, grandparents get two years older. Were we able to let our curious and cheerful teenage grandchildren, who tended to be a bit too extreme, do their own things? In other words, were we not able to watch them anymore? Would we have survived if misfortune had happened to them? Could we take on that responsibility? I remembered how Sarah and Maria, who had lived in Kyrgyzstan for some years, had told me how the black haired Central Asian men gazed awestruck at the girls who had blond or very bright hair. These lustful hot-blooded men would be capable of anything if they wanted to take possession of a blond girl. Our Svetlana was one of these young blond girls. During the last summer in Tokmok, our fears turned out to be justified.

Two irreparable misfortunes happened nearby. Ten girls from a holiday camp were kidnapped on a bus. No one knew what had happened to them. The investigation was not completely over by the time we had left Kyrgyzstan forever. The drivers of the bus had looked like decent men. They were well dressed. On a particular day, they went to the holiday camp like any normal person, showed their document verified by an official stamp to the children's caretakers. The document was addressed to the leading supervisor of the holiday camp. She was asked to send a group of European girls for a photo shoot done by a local newspaper. The bus would return the girls in one hour. After the inexperienced caregiver had given her permission, the men selected ten girls according to their taste. However, one of the female caregivers insisted on accompanying the girls on the trip since she did want to leave the children alone. The men did not reject her demand. In this way, they left the camp. One hour later, people were alarmed since the bus had not yet returned. Not far away from the campsite, they found the dead body of the female caregiver. She had been raped. [332] The second incident occurred in our town. As you can often see, boys between the age of ten and eleven were playing together on the street during the day. A vehicle stopped beside the group, and a nice-looking man got out of the car to ask whether one of the boys could show this stranger a certain street. Obviously, the boys could help them. As expected, one of the boys offered his help, and got into the car. Similar to the other incident, the police searched for the car in vain. However, on the following day, a girl, who herded a very small sheep flock, heard someone whimpering and wailing behind a bush. The girl then found a boy bound head and foot. He lay crying for his mother. When unbinding his head, the emergency doctors looked at a terrifying face. The boy had lost both eyes. It was clear that a person with some expertise had removed the eyes. Likewise, the boy had been bound in a professional medical manner. The doctors concluded that the boy's eyes might have been used for transplantation. The day before, this helpful boy had been chosen on the street to become an involuntary eye donor.

My grandchildren were shocked, and then scared as we told them about these terrible, evil events. This was a warning for them against the dangers anyone might encounter when

visiting lonely places. In fact, our warnings left a deep impression on them. Svetlana, full of emotions and empathy, shed many tears. My grandchildren swore by God that they would be more careful. We took these events as a personal warning not to take any risk with the children. We were convinced that the time when we were able to protect our grandchildren had come to an end even though we might not have done a bad job. Our grandchildren were not small children who needed caretakers like us anymore. At this point, they needed a different sort of protection that we could not provide them. When our son picked up his children that summer, we discussed in detail how his children were growing up while his parents were getting older. That was just a natural development, and, as we both expected, we understood each other. We advised our son to make different plans for their future holidays. From now on, they had to travel together with their children. The children needed some amusement. They had to learn how to travel. Their parents, who were experienced travelers, would be able to support their children in this learning process. Later on, the grandchildren would travel on their own. Their parents followed our advice. That was a good decision.

Now we had reached a point in our life of which we had always been afraid, although it had been impossible to avoid. We had not wanted to believe that this would happen to us. However, we had to accept that we could not offer anything to our children and grandchildren anymore. In other words, the short time where we were independent began. [233] It was not at all true that we had become tired of each other. We would always be very happy when seeing each other. However, our grandchildren would have gotten bored if they had continued to stay at our place for the entire summer. Moreover, our children did not need our help anymore as they had before. The time where we would need the assistance of our children and grandchildren had not yet begun. Obviously, we were aware that this time would arrive relatively soon. And this fact worried us, and provoked us to think hard. What should we do when we begin to need the help of our children? We couldn't avoid it. They couldn't move to us considering that they were well established in their home. Could we expect them to give that up? Of course not. We would have to move to our children since it would be worse the other way around. Were we supposed to move back to Siberia, where the winter lasts for nine months while it is -30° to -40°C? That would be just terrible! Apart from this, Lyudmila's mother already lived with our children. Our children's home would have turned into a retirement home. In the end, they would decide to send us to a real one. However, we wondered which retirement home would admit us, considering that our children were well-off. Both were doctors, and one of our grandchildren would soon become a doctor. Consequently, we could not rely on this solution. We had to figure out where we would spend the rest of our lives.

In the meantime, the political situation of the Germans who lived in the Soviet Union improved, although they did not believe that they would ever enjoy full freedom. The Germans responded to the Soviets' promise to adhere to human rights as follows: if the Soviets want to grant human rights to us as promised, they should prove it by making it easier for us to leave Russia. However, considering that the Soviets did not do that, it became obvious that their promise was not honest.

This is why our desire to leave the Soviet Union gradually strengthened. How long had the Germans been waiting to emigrate from Russia? Just recall the year 1929. However,

we did not hope that we could have an emigration according to the resettlement agreement between the Germany and the Soviet Union. This agreement only applied to fragmented families who wanted to reunite, and we did not have any relatives in Germany. During my life in the Soviet Union, I often had prepared emigration documents. This made my own desire to emigrate stronger. The debate about emigrating from the Soviet Union became more and more intense. We were soon convinced of the idea. [334] We asked ourselves why we wished to emigrate from Russia. Did we want to improve our living conditions by moving to West Germany? Could we expect anything from living abroad? In fact, we had everything we needed in Russia. However, moving to Germany would allow us to visit our relatives in Canada. That was an important argument. Yet we were not interested in moving to Canada. Our wish was to visit our brothers and to connect with them. We were also aware of the situation of the German-Russians. They would gradually disappear and assimilate into mainstream Russian society even though they would not die out soon. Every year, the assimilation process quickened. We had only to look at our own grandchildren. I remembered my mother's last letter. We noticed how much we were impressed by this letter. Would my father's wish finally come true? What could we do to achieve this? What were we obliged to do? How should we begin?

We received a letter from my Sister Tina in Canada. She made us aware that Henry, the youngest son of my brother Hans, lived with his family in Germany. He worked as a headmaster at a school. He and his entire family spoke German well.

This letter initiated a new period in the relationship between my sister and us. We carefully read Tina's letter several times. We asked ourselves whether we should give it a try. However, we also had some doubts considering that Henry was only our nephew. The Soviet government only allowed fathers-mothers-sons/daughters, and sisters/brothers to reunite. We also wondered whether Henry would be willing to invite us, considering that the inviting person had to take on certain responsibilities. Anyway, we decided to give it a try. Obviously filing an application for emigration, provided that we would receive an invitation, did not necessarily mean that we would obtain permission for emigration. Nonetheless, we would try it. We wrote a letter to Henry and his wife, Margaret. We asked them to invite us. One month later, Henry gave us an invitation. Then things got serious. When our son visited us to pick up his children, we discussed our plan. However, he was not willing to understand our reasons for wishing to emigrate. We tried to understand his point of view. He could remember his life from the time when our family had enough food after the crisis years of the war. But he could not remember his suffering during the food shortage. As a child, he did not know how much we had suffered during the time when a officer exercised control over us. That period had also been one of German-baiting. He had become a doctor, and had married a Russian woman while enjoying the good living conditions. He was not aware of the general relationship between Germans and Russians. All his colleagues were Russians. He could barely remember how the Russians tortured his brother Reinhard. [335] Fortunately, he had not experienced the Russian hatred against Germans. He only remembered the time of improved circumstances. He was able to achieve popularity. The marriage with a Russian woman helped him in that respect. Out of inexperience, he was more open to believe the propaganda of the Communist Party. Consequently, he was more optimistic about the future of German-Russians than we were. We had had very bad experiences twice in our lifetime (remembering the situation of

Germans before the First World War), so we couldn't be optimistic. We still did not trust the Russians due to past experience, whereas our son did trust them. Of course, we wished that our son's optimism was justified. We also knew that my father and other Germans could be blamed for not leaving Russia when they had the opportunity. The Germans had made many mistakes.

We decided to file an application for emigration to see whether we would obtain permission or not. From experience, we knew that we shouldn't pay too much attention to personal wishes. Nonetheless, a person should not just be resigned to fate. That reminded me of my father's words, "If you do your part, God will do His part." Those words reflect the attitude we embraced in 1978 when filing the application with all the necessary documents. We acted as if nothing unusual was happening, but just went about our usual business. Winter passed and spring came. Everything remained the same. We prepared ourselves for the next winter in such a way that we could easily emigrate at any time. However, we did wonder how we would support ourselves after receiving permission to emigrate. At this time, some other concerns unsettled us.

At the end of April, the KGB asked me to come to their office. They informed me that I had already obtained permission to emigrate in February two months previously. It was their mistake. We were so excited that we couldn't conceal it. We sold our belongings, or gave them away. We had a good time, and made other people happy. We only took with us the necessary things for travel. We had two suitcases, a strap around bedding, and some dishes and cutlery for the kitchen. We had to take photos of our documents since we were not allowed to carry them with us. Each of us was permitted to change 90 rubles. Consequently, we could change 180 rubles in total. We still had about 10,000 rubles left after selling our house. We sent the money to our son. Now the emigration process started. We were required to hand in our documents. That was a very long bureaucratic process that also involved bribes. We really felt abused. However, there was no way to avoid it. [336] There were also holidays that delayed the process. The days preceding and following the holidays also delayed the process. May 1st was May Day; May 9th was Victory Day, and so forth. While preparing for our travel, we did not want to join any demonstrations. We endeavoured to draw as little attention as possible. We also decided not to inform our son about our emigration immediately, considering his negative attitude toward our travel. We wanted to prevent interrupting his work or being worried. Later on, he would relax. We preferred to send one of our relatives to inform him in person about our emigration. We were aware that our son and our grandchildren would struggle to accept that from now on, a boundary would separate us from each other. It would not be easy to cross this boundary, but they would get used to it.

Now the date of our travel arrived. On 23 May 1979, our airplane for Moscow left Frunze [Bishkek], the capital of Kyrgyzstan. We passed customs without difficulty. They did not check any of our luggage. The customs officials did a proper job, and we were polite to them. Likewise, we did not encounter any difficulties at the consulate. The consul congratulated us on our successful emigration, and wished us a good start in West Germany. Five hours later, we landed at Frankfurt Airport. We left the plane and entered German territory.

In the concourse of the airport, we waited for what would happen next. Exhausted by our travel, we rested on the comfortable chairs. We talked to a couple that had arrived on another airplane. They explained that they had come from Russia. The husband, who introduced himself as Mr. Redekopp, told us that they were from Canada. They had travelled to Kuban in Russia to visit the grave of his mother. However, they couldn't find his mother's burial since the graveyard had been entirely covered by weeds. They had to return to Canada without completing the objective of their trip. They were waiting for the plane that would bring them to their home city, Winnipeg. Kuban had been his home, but they hadn't been able to find anything that had been there when their family left. I thought about the graveyard in Nordheim where we had buried the body of my beloved father in 1938. My father had wished to be buried there for the sake of us, his descendants. I wondered whether I would ever visit his grave again. I wrote the following lines during my service in the Labour Army in the Second World War on my father's memorial day (he died on June 11, 1938). I will quote from it.

A serene and holy place emerged in our native village the day my father died. His heart will feel sadness whenever someone attends this place. [337]. He will relieve his grief by shedding tears. My heart is yearning for the place where my cradle once stood, and where the body of my beloved father now rests; so, my heart suffers much pain. In vain, I am looking for rest. My heart is always calling me, "Go to the corner that is surrounded by a thorn hedge."

The graveyard in Nordheim was surrounded by a thorn hedge of olive trees. While sitting on the soft black chair at Frankfurt Airport, I told myself, "No, I will probably not be able to visit the place where my beloved father rests. However, I fulfilled your wish that your dear little Anna, my mother, related to me shortly before her death. You wanted us to live in Germany. Thank you, my dear father, for this order."

Voices interrupted my thoughts. Someone asked, "Who here is from Russia?" We were invited to follow the man with our few pieces of luggage. We went to Friedland. While on the train to Friedland, I remembered how we brought my father to Nordheim in secret, having died an exile in Stalino. We wanted to preserve his grave. When I asked my father shortly before his death whether he wanted to be buried in Nordheim, he only tried to show a little smile. After this, he whispered to me, "Just because of you." I also remembered the death of my mother. In 1945, she was buried in the small Siberian village of Stepnoje. Soon after her funeral, the graveyard had been ploughed under. Therefore, my mother's grave was lost. Even though my parents had always been next to each other during their life, in death they were buried far apart. While sitting in the rail car, I could not avoid singing the song *The Grassy Bank* [*Die Rasenbank*]:

I know a lonely place on earth.
It is calm and concealed.
If worries are torturing me,
If I am suffering from grief,
I will flee to this place.
It is not far away, not far away from here.

Memories of His Homeland

The grassy bank next to my parent's grave
is the best place I've found on earth.

A magic power always draws me there,
if people are fighting with me.
If I am abandoned, I will flee to this place.
I lament my pains there.
The dead are speaking to me there.
That's where my parents rest in peace.
The grassy bank next to my parent's grave
is the best place I've found on earth.

If I am exhausted and tired of life,
and if I have to leave this earth,
I will ask God for one favour:
"Please, take me to this graveyard."
After death has put me to sleep,
I will rest in peace forever.
The grassy bank next to my parent's grave
is the best place I've found on earth.

I also remembered the places where my siblings had been buried. My family once lived close to each other. However, our graves are spread over the entire world. We, siblings, are only able to visit a few of them. That hurts me a lot.

[338] Friedland was one of the several transit camps for repatriates from Eastern Europe. Here was their first accommodation in Germany. In addition, they were registered and sent to their next location. We obtained a nice room, and we were very well fed. In particular, I enjoyed the friendly faces who glanced at us in every section we had to visit. We experienced with joy how much a glance of a fellow human can affect you. It can express peace, friendliness, benevolence and willingness to help. Remembering our past, we knew a glance can also convey hatred, malevolence, anger, indifference, and many other negative emotions. On the second day of our stay on 26 May, the tracing service helped us contact Heinrich and Margaret Toews. It was wonderful. On the same day, we visited the evangelical chapel in the camp. The sermon was about the return of the prodigal son. Upon leaving the service, every worshipper got a Bible and a song book. The following day, we underwent medical tests, and completed various registration processes. We were then invited to the office where clothing and money were distributed. On 30 May we left the hospital transit camp of Friedland where we had lodged in house 6-3A.

That day we continued our journey going by train to Rastatt, where the transit camp of the state of Baden-Württemberg was located. The Black Forest region is part of Baden-Württemberg. We enjoyed a wonderful ride through an amazing landscape. The passengers had many conversations. Where are you from? Where are you going? Are you really from Russia? Oh dear! However, you still speak German very well. In Rastatt, we moved to house number 39, apartment 1, room C. We received 40 deutschmarks to support ourselves. We now looked for a grocery store or supermarket. It was not easy for us to find eggs,

potatoes, bread, salt, and other necessities, considering how many products they had there. We were impressed by the selection of the supermarket. We wondered whether all cities were so well supplied. We doubted that, but it would turn out that our doubts were unjustified. After finishing our groceries, we took a nice warm bath.

Later, Heinrich and Margaret contacted us. They wanted to pick us up. They granted us an advance on our pension. We received 450 deutschmarks. On 1 June, Heinrich and Margaret came to pick us up. (On this occasion, we inadvertently made a big mistake. We were not admitted to social housing because H. Toews took care of us. So, we had to find a flat on our own which was made it more expensive.) On this day, we greeted the Canadians for the first time. I did not remember who was the first of us who said, "Oh, so this what you look like." I believe we said together, "Yes, we are these people. We are finally here." Heinrich and Margaret replied, "We are happy to see you." Their faces were beaming. They saw their uncle and aunt, and we saw our nephew and niece for the first time—we had never seen each other before. Heinrich always pressed the gas pedal harder and harder. The car raced down the Highway 3, always going faster—first 60 kilometres per hour, then 80, and finally 100 or more. However, the road was as flat as ice. [339] We then arrived at the house where Heinrich and Margaret lived with their four children: Johanna, Theresa, Tim, and Mark. It was a nice family. They were polite, helpful, and happy. They showed us our room. They said, "Make yourself comfortable. Make yourself at home. Your travel from Russia to Germany is over. You are now a part of our family, and are warmly welcomed." Ten days before, we had departed from Tokmok in Kyrgyzstan. We had left our homeland that we had loved, abandoning it. We wondered what would happen to us in Germany. Now we had ended up where we wanted to be. We could not go back.

On 4 June, we celebrated my 70th birthday in Germany. I had to tell many stories about my life. Our hosts were interested in learning about Russia, the largest country by area in the world. We got to know how many things were done in Germany. We had to get used to them. We were surprised how many things were done differently here.

Heinrich had informed his father, my brother Hans, that we would soon arrive in Germany. My brother had promised to fly from Canada to Germany on 10 June. We were looking forward to meeting him after 53 years. We wondered whether we would be able to recognize him. We gradually became impatient. Heinrich's home was located on a hill from where you could survey the entire little village of Sitzenkirch. It was three kilometres away from Kandern. They rented this good house with its many rooms. From the patio of the house, you could see the mountains and the meadows on which many sheep were grazing, a sublime view. You couldn't get tired of it. That was the Black Forest. Its name originated from its dark trees, the dark understorey of the European beeches.

They found a house for us. It was located at the foot of the mountains. The area was characterized by thick forests and valleys. We enjoyed a wonderful view from our windows. Our house was surrounded by flowers and meadows that extended to the asphalt of the road. Everything was green, and everywhere were flowers. On 9 June we moved to our house in Kandern. We moved from a little village into a town. We wondered whether this town would become our true new home, or whether we would only live there

temporarily. We were impressed by the town's beauty. We are happy, and we thank you, Heinrich and Margaret, for what you have done for us. We were finally in Germany!

On 10 June, Hans and his second wife, Clara, arrived at Basel airport. We drove to Basel, 15 kilometres over the German border. Everything went well. Here, we eventually met brother Hans after 53 years, nevertheless, we recognized each other. We embraced and kissed, and shed many tears of joy. [340] There was an association in West Germany that researched the life of Germans from Russia. This association also published a magazine entitled *Volk auf dem Weg*¹. Some years ago, I read an article in this magazine about an interview with an older man who talked about his life in Germany. The man said many positive things about Germany, but one sentence stuck with me, spoken with a clearly melancholic undertone. "I am looking for a homeland, but I cannot find it."

I have to admit that I could not forget about this cry of pain. Later on, I sat on my desk to write the following lines. I chose only one word as its title, *Wehmut* [melancholy].

Whenever I am wandering in the forest to ease my mind,
I will recall the homeland that used to look at me as if it knew me.
O my dear beautiful homeland, I loved your green hills
covered by gardens, fields, and heathers,
and many other things that cheered the heart.
How lovely your flowers smelled!
What trees shaded the footpaths!
I felt so much happiness in my heart.
I forgot all my pain in my homeland.
Whenever the afterglow faded,
and we sought for rest after work,
we, siblings, would start to form a choir,
and we would sing in the German style.
Were we only singing?
No! We were also playing instruments
with many strings very skillfully.
Indeed, we sang many songs in this time
frozen that long time ago (60 years).
However, times are always changing,
and evil people never sleep.
They turn their designs to destroy our hopes
over and over in their minds.
They targeted our parents too,
their hair having already turned white.
My parents had to leave their homeland,
had to flee into the world.
They had fought hard for their home.
They constrained themselves to build a home.

¹ People On the Move

Their home was more than a building for them.
They had 12 children.
They were happy to see that their children could see from afar
how beautiful their home was.
Their children always ran home.
Yet, our home then ceased to exist.
We had to go into the world.
Our choir stopped singing cheerful songs
and playing our string instruments.
[341] If your parents are not living at your home anymore,
and you can't find your beloved ones there anymore,
your home will cease to be your home,
and you will not like to live at home anymore.
Indeed, your home is a sacred place.
You should never abandon it.
However, that was not the case for us.
Fate never gave us back our home.
We like to remember our home,
although it is now far away from us.
At least we have found a motherland here,
instead of our home.

Written by David Toews, 1983, Kandern

In 1940, I saw my native village for the last time after ten years.
I returned to my home village that then still existed,
I breathed the same air,
I heard the same songs,
Nonetheless, the village had changed.
The house where my little mother had conceived me years ago
still stood there.
I then noticed strange people.
Alas, alas, I felt grief.
It seemed to be that a voice moaned through the air.
“Flee, flee, and never return,
Your beloved ones left the place (They had been deported)
They will never return. Never!” (They had been killed.)

In 1953, Katja, my wife, had travelled with our son, age 12, from Siberia to Stalino to visit the city. She still met many of our Russian friends who gave her a warm welcome. That was exceptional in these times. Then she made the trip to our home village, but she could neither find our house, nor her parents' house. She slept at the neighbouring house my brother Hans and Justina had once owned. She was unable to recognize many things, nor could she find many things that had been familiar to her.

After that, none of us visited our beloved home village. Nonetheless, we have the impression of listening to beautiful music or melodies when hearing the names of Nordheim, Ebental, Michelsheim, Kotlyarevka, Selidovka, Zhelanaya, and many other

towns. That is how home feels to us. There is no place in the world like your home. From a grammatical point of view, “Heimat” (home in German) has no plural. The same applies in Russian too. Who knows, it might be the same for other languages. The Russian word for home is *Prodina*. (You often capitalize the first letter of the word.)

With these lines, I finish my memoir that has told the story of my life from childhood until today. In other words, I narrated my life from my earliest childhood in Russia onwards until we left Russia to immigrate to Germany, the home of our ancestors. My memoir ends in the year 1982. (We arrived in Germany in 1979.)

What is Home?

[342] As long as peace prevails in a country or among nations, you do not often need to speak about home. The same applies to a situation where all family members live harmoniously under the same roof, when they are willing to live at their parental home or close to it since they do not feel the urge to go out into the world. Under these circumstances, no one longs for home. There is no reason for wishing it. No one suffers from homesickness because everyone lives at home. Everyone knows that with appetite comes eating. You cannot observe that someone uses terms like “at home,” “going home,” “homesickness,” or “yearning for the homeland” before leaving the borders of their home district for a longer period. This phenomenon is well known, so unnecessary to prove. A wise adage captures it well: You don’t realize what you have until it’s gone.

At this time, millions of people are sad about the loss of their homes. Most of them used to have one. Some of the people who lost their homes could find a second one. They now call a place that used to be foreign to them their home. By the same token, a place that used to be their home is now foreign to them.

In 1930, I lost my home. My parents had built this house themselves with their own sweat and blood. They had birthed 12 children there. My parents had to bury two of them, and had raised ten of them at that place. They had lived in this home for 40 years. They had experienced much joy in this house. They also had to deal with some difficulties there. I had lived in this house for 20 years. I had been born, and was married there. This house, including its garden, yard, and all other things that belonged to it, was my home. The one-kilometre-long street had 17 farmsteads on each side. At its centre, next to our house, was the school, and next to it, the cemetery. Along with our house it formed a complex that was the lovely village of Nordheim (later called Marinovka). There were 34 farmsteads in total. They stood in rows on both sides of the street. Our house was number nine. This small village, inhabited by calm people, was my native village, a modest farming village. Every farmer possessed 32 hectares. Only two farmers owned more land. Gerhard Rogalsky had 60 hectares since he had two farms, and Johann Toews had 75 hectares since he had two and a half farms. No rich farmer lived there. However, I would not exchange my native village for a wealthier one, or even a town!

My native village belonged to a larger administrative district. Nordheim was a part of the village council of Michelsheim (Michailovka). The village council belonged to the municipality of Selidovka. This municipality was run by the administration of Galizinovka. The administration belonged to the region of Yusovka (that was later called Stalino and ever later Donetsk). The region belonged to the district of Bachmut (renamed Artyomovsk). The district belonged to the province of Yekaterinoslav (that was renamed Dnepropetrovsk). The province belonged to Russian Ukraine, and later the Soviet Union. That was my homeland. I loved this place. It was my most beloved thing on earth. We all loved our homeland especially my parents, but also all my siblings, not because they thought that this was the best place on earth, but because they felt at home there.

[343] I wonder how a piece of land can become your home. Home is what is familiar to you. Home is what makes you feel comfortable. It sounds like a wonderful piece of music or as a melody that you cannot forget. However, adults, children and elderly people differ in their understanding of home.

The child's home is the small place where their beloved mother caresses them, where they notice the happy smiles, and intimate glances of their mother, where they feel their mother's dear hands and lap, where they sense their mother's face with their closed eyes that the children like to touch with their tender hands. A child who lacks a caring mother does not have a home. This child is a stranger everywhere. The child's playmates are not able to provide them with a home. Only the child's mother can do that; not even the best caregiver can replace a mother. A child can only sense love where love is granted and received. For this reason, every child who has a caring mother has a home.

Adults have a broader understanding of home. They feel at home at the place where they played with their peers without having any worries, where they could walk guided by their parents or elder siblings. Later, they discovered and learned about the plentitude of their surrounding on their own. At first, they did it unconsciously. Later, they became conscious of their experiences. They feel at home at the place where they knew every tree, bush, and bird's nest in their garden, and where they could walk through the meadows, forests and valleys attended by their parents. There they could climb hills, swim in the nearby river, or go fishing. At this place, the children learned how to take care of their parents' tasks that become progressively more difficult. Children had to fulfill their duties in the house, yard, garden, stable, and barn. This is the place where children went to school, frequented the church service, or joined festivities. There they spent the long winter evenings in a heated room while reading or writing poems, or practicing for a performance, or choral singing. At this place, the soul received its first deep and unforgettable impressions—just consider the emerging early desire, and the first kiss. Remember the time when the children felt love for the first time, and they cried because of their longing for fulfilled desires while the nightingales were singing. This happened there. They walked hand in hand with their chosen one for the first time. At this place, they believed they were alone so could speak to each other secretly. At this place, they only committed their words to the silent moon. This place is home, indeed. No evil person, nor your enemy, no one is able to deprive you of the experiences that shaped your home.

The elderly and old people have an even broader understanding of home than adults. They do not only feel at home at the places where the most memorable experiences of this youth happened, but they also feel at home at the places they worked, where they covered the soil with their own sweat—sometimes even with their tears, or blood. Their home is the place where they established their own family, and built their own house. Their true home is the place where the graves of their parents, family members and ancestors are located, provided that they are allowed to live and work there. In this case, they will also build their own burial mound there.

These experiences I mentioned are the ones that make a place a home for many of my contemporaries and me. These and similar experiences prevent us from forgetting our home. But we weren't lucky enough to keep our home. As long as I was able to feel safe at home, my home was really my home. It would remain my home, even if I left it for a certain period of time. Whenever I returned, I would even feel how much I loved it grow even stronger. In fact, I yearned for my home.

[344] Now I wonder whether I missed the location that used to bear the name of my home, or whether I missed the streets that I had walked along thousands of times, or whether I missed the houses I had seen in the yards. In fact, I probably missed everything. I also missed the landscape around my village. In Nordheim, farmsteads did not have picket fences. Other villages did and I liked them. Who does not like a picket fence? Nonetheless, I preferred the street of my Nordheim where you could only see wooden fences over the streets rather than brick walls or picket fences. I loved the crooked footbridges that were behind the gardens of the village along both sides of the street. Some of these footbridges went through bushes and thickets. These footbridges were covered by uncut grass. Despite this, I loved these uneven and untidy footbridges. I am writing these lines in 1983. 50 years have passed since 1930 when I walked over these footbridges for the last time. Nevertheless, I can still describe each of these footbridges that were located in 34 gardens of my native village. There was Ditr. Klassens' back garden where there were high, thickly planted poplars. Every year during the Easter holidays, young people always hung swings on the two biggest poplars. Both young people and their predecessors amused themselves like that. We spent unforgettable and happy hours in this garden. Next to the garden with the swings was the garden of the Peter Dick. Our graveyard that was covered by thick grass was next to it. Many generations of young people played their games on the unused quarter of the graveyard. If someone today criticizes us for not respecting the peace of the dead, I would offer them the following explanation. We did not desecrate the graves of our ancestors. By contrast, some of my peers visited the grave of their dead family members during or after their play. They thanked them for the life they had granted them. They remembered the happy hours they had once spent with the deceased relative. On these occasions, they expressed their gratitude by laying flowers on their graves. No, our games did not disrespect our deceased ones. It was more like that the living people, and their ancestors spent time together. I am happy to remember these hours while paying tribute to them.

There was a beautiful "forest" of ornamental trees close to the orchard of the Warkentin family. You could find garden benches in this forest. Here, you could spend cozy hours. They kept this small forest very clean. Nikolai Dick's back garden had a splendid shrub

garden full of maples. They took good care of the garden that made it a pleasure to walk there. In our back garden, there was the only footbridge that was covered by flowers on both sides. There was a unique hedge with American cherries next to it. That was a wonderful small place. My father had a seat in one of its corners from which you could survey the entire garden. [345] Father liked this small place. He used to sit there on a stump that he had cut from a thick poplar. I will never forget how much effort my father took in rolling this stump to the corner of the garden shaded by cherries. My father made another place where he liked to rest under the tall pear tree. I can still remember all the trees and shrubs where he liked to stand, how they looked, and which fruit they bore. I have not forgotten any part of the houses, yards, gardens, and fields that belonged to my native village. I often remembered them so it became impossible for me to forget anything. No, you cannot forget anything pertaining to your home. I do not feel overrun by nostalgia when recalling my home. I am surely not the only one who feels a sense of home. People who lived before my time must have felt this way, too. The following lines indicate this:

1. I have to walk a little bit further. I am close to the gate. I can see some lovely roofs behind these green hedges.
2. I see this garden, every tree, and every shrub again. I sit down close to the Rhine while there is an evening breeze.
3. The familiar flowerbeds look fair, lovely, and joyful. Those same flowerbeds once provided me with refreshing air.
4. Yet, I am asking questions and looking around in vain. Alas, the familiar hearts that were dear to me will never beat again.
5. My home was this path out there. My beloved-ones rest behind the hedges of the graveyard in front of the town.

I would be in the same situation if I visited my native village today. I would not be able to find the people who once lived in the houses of my village. These people made my native village a true home. Without these people, I did not feel at home in my native village. All the villagers, including my family and I, are part of my home. My picture of my home would not be complete with them, even the people with whom I did not maintain the best relationship.

My readers would get tired if I listed all villagers who lived in Nordheim at the time when I was home there according to the house numbers. But it would be easy for me to name all the members of the thirty-two Nordheim households, including shepherds and night watchmen, who lived with me in Nordheim back then. I would be able to recall their first and last name and write a short characterization of each person. I will not do this.

In conclusion, your home does not only consist of a piece of land, your house, your belongings, and your activities. Logically, you cannot have activities without fellow human beings. So, the definition of “Heimat” also includes all your neighbours, particularly in a village where everyone knows each other. That cannot hold true for a city.

This conclusion leads me to another question whether your home will remain your home forever. That is obviously not the case for many reasons. If the reason why you feel at home at a place diminishes or ceases to exist, your feeling of belonging will fade away too. In this case, your home will turn into a strange place. In 1930, our feeling of belonging began to evaporate when evil people deprived us of our house by slander and forced my father to save his life by fleeing. [346] The disappearance of home continued in 1931. That year I had to leave my native village because of the hatred and malevolence of the same people who had slandered my father. Leaving home, especially if you are forced to do so, makes you often recall the places where you spent your youth. You remember the time when your home was still dear to you, when you could feel love there. No one wants to live at a home where you do not feel loved. In this way, the home that I used to love passionately gradually turned into a place that felt strange to me. Whenever I crept back to my formerly beloved native village in the course of the years to visit my father's grave, I always felt like the poet of the following song.¹

1. I returned to my home. It was still the same. I breathed the same air, and I heart the same songs. Yet, it had changed.
2. I saw in front of the house where my beloved mother used to welcome me, people I did not know. Alas, alas, I did not feel well.
3. I felt as if I heard a voice in the air that yelled, "Flee, flee, and never return. Your beloved has moved away, and will never return."

I felt this way when I went to my relatives in Nordheim in 1939.² About 30 persons, including people who were very dear to me, had been affected by Stalin's great purge from 1936 to 1938: my brother Peter; Katja's uncle, Jakob Bartel; Katja's brother and my best friend, Heinrich Bartel; Gerhard Isaak, and many others. These people never returned from their exile to their families.³ Everywhere I met people I did not know. They had moved and settled in my former village. I met young, friendly people who greeted me. Who were these young adults? These grown-ups had been children whom I might have known back then. But now they looked different, or I could not remember them. In any case, they were strangers to me. I also struggled to find the paths that led to the village. They had relocated them. A long, treed strip was planted behind our gardens. It went along the village, and crossed all the fields. I wondered why these trees were there. Anyways, it was there now. Some industrious hands had planted it. It had been growing well in the fertile soil of our fields during the years of my absence. (Remember, I used to be a part of this collective farm as well.) There was also a newly planted orchard for the collective farm between the line of trees and our former gardens along the village. This orchard had not existed before. Many other things in my former home village had changed since I had left. No, this village was not my home anymore. I had approached this village full of emotions. I had expected to see my old home village again. That was a failure. I did not feel at home in this village.

¹ *Written in the margin:* I shortened the text a little bit and deviated from it slightly.

² *Written in the margin:* Now where are the playmates of my wonderful youth?

³ *Written in the margin:* In Germany, we learned that all the people who had been imprisoned in 1938 had been shot.

It was not familiar. I sometimes even felt like a stranger there. I could only visit a few people I still knew. I only spent a short time with my parents-in-law who still lived in their home. I visited my sister Liese. My mother had lived at her place after my father died. I then heard a quiet voice in my heart, “Flee, flee, and never return.”

[347] The tide had turned for me since my flight from my home village eight to ten years before. In 1931 I had to leave because of intrigue. I was a pariah who had to fight to survive. But my situation improved over the years. The intriguers had fallen into their own trap that they had prepared for their innocent enemy. They had perished in so doing. Now I was welcomed in my home village again. It had changed dramatically over the years, and I didn’t feel at home anymore. Furthermore, my feeling of belonging to my home had diminished as a result of the separation. My home and I grew apart from each other. So, I had to flee again, even though it felt different than my first flight. In this way, I grew apart from my village, my parental home, and my close social circle. I still did feel more attachment to my home region. I first fled to the Caucasus but later returned to my home region of Stalino (formerly named Yuzovka, later Donetsk). Here, I felt comfortable after preventing the persecution of the KGB. I would have been able to be established there. The KGB permitted a free life, and I was capable. I was a well-respected person and worker. We also owned a home. It was an apartment of 32m². Considering the most important factors, housing and job, I could have found another house there. But this didn’t last long because the Second World War broke out.

The war between Germany and the Soviet Union was the third step in the loss of our home. Under the pretext of protective evacuation, the Soviet government, without mercy, relocated us to Siberia. That happened on 12 November 1941, after they dispossessed all our belongings. Deprived of the last pieces of home, they put us on rail cars, sending us to off as if we were just parcels. They did not send us away to protect our lives but to create miserable living conditions for us. They wanted to make as many of us as possible die in misery. Only a few of us were intended to survive. In the so-called civilized world (and the Soviet Union claims to be a part of it), no nation had been deprived of its homeland in such a hypocritical and villainous manner as happened to the Germans who lived in European Russia in 1941. After 15 years of internment, we were not allowed to return to our former home regions. At the present time, part of the younger generation feels at home in the Soviet Union again. We should feel happy for them, but most Germans who once had a home there, still remember it with grief. It is unlikely that these Germans will feel at home in the Soviet Union again. It doesn’t matter where they have settled. The immigration history of these homeless Germans has culminated in resettlement to the homeland of their ancestors—Germany.¹ I have lost my parental home, home village, and home area. I also lost my entire home on a broader scale, my homeland, Ukraine. I felt like a homeless person. However, I regained my motherland that my ancestors had left and abandoned for no good reason. I wonder whether I will manage to feel at home in my generous motherland at some point.

¹ Russian Mennonites had no ancestry in the Germany we know today. Their history began in the coastal areas of what is today the Netherlands and Poland. This false identification with Germany emerged over the two centuries of their settlement in Russia. David admits this on page 323.

[348] Until now, I have discussed the concept of home in terms of the different generations. We saw that toddlers, children, grownups, adult men or women, or elderly persons all have a different sense of belonging. People may also develop different understandings of what home means to them depending on their varying emotions.

I talked about it with one detainee. I also talked about it when I met someone, and we were not in a hurry, or we both had to wait in line in front of a shop for several hours. In such situations, I had conversations like this, “When I think about how beautiful my home was... No, we were not well-off. Our house was not big. Yet, it was beautiful. We had a garden with many different kinds of flowers. Also, our garden was not big. However, we always had many different sorts of fruit. None of our fruit were ever wasted. If we could not eat it immediately, the children dried it for winter. Children also kept the entire yard, garden, house, and barn in order. Every child had their own duty, and checked up on each other. They also rotated duties so that they learned to take care of the farm step by step. Everyone loved their tidy home where they always had a good time. In the evening, young and old played with each other after the work was done. We, parents, joined in their playing. We also sometimes sat together in the summerhouse or on the patio. We shared stories, sang, played instruments, and talked to each other. Likewise, we always kept our fields in order so that they looked nice. No one accepted things out of order or just laying around. No one wanted to leave home. Everyone wanted to run their own house just like our parental home had been. Saturday was a particularly heavy work day. Until noon, we were busy doing fieldwork—plowing, weeding, mowing, threshing and so forth. In the afternoon, we cleaned up. We swept the footpaths and sprinkled them with sand. We also painted the house, and fixed the fence. Afterwards, we took baths. Meanwhile, mother and sisters cleaned up the house, and baked. We never worked on Sundays. Family members could go to church, or walk in the fields or elsewhere. In the evening, everyone returned home. We ate together and discussed what we would do on Monday. We loved our home where happiness, peace, and love prevailed.”

Someone else told me how good and beautiful his home was. They had a big house, a big stable and barn. The house was fully furnished. In the stable, they kept many horses, cows, and sheep. However, they couldn't run their household all by themselves. They always hired servants. Nonetheless, the family worked for the entire day too. They also had a big farmstead with all necessary agricultural equipment and machinery. He told me how much grain they harvested, how many cattle they used to sell, and how much land they had purchased. Every son of his family received his own farmstead. Indeed, they were hardworking, and well equipped. Nonetheless, they were deprived of everything. I asked whether his family had also used to sing and play together. He responded to me that they had never had time for leisure. On Sunday, they also went to the market because they had to sell many cattle, and they had to take care of things they had not been able to do during the week. Indeed, he had a good time at home.

[349] I could find other examples that would give an idea of the different attitudes of humans towards defining home. At this point, I want to point out that I do not intend to provide an account of all possible definitions of home. I will only address two different approaches towards defining home since these have left a lasting impression on me. My discussion of these approaches will not be restricted to the definition of home, but I will

broaden it by addressing the definition of life as well. Maybe, it would be more precise to speak about an “interest in life.”

My distinction becomes clear when looking at our two previous narrators. The first narrator was primarily interested in the spiritual values of his way of life, whereas the second one was mainly preoccupied with material values. The first narrator aimed at being, whereas the second one was concerned with possessing. Nonetheless, both of them talked about their home. Here, my aim is not to judge which way of life is more beneficial for the common good. I only want to focus on the fact that both narrators considered their own home as the most suitable place to pursue their individual way of life. That is natural, indeed. However, it is also the other way around. All their lives many, if not most, people will remember their experiences of gathering at home or in their house. Their experiences also leave lasting impressions on their descendants, although not necessarily positive. I am now approaching the field of pedagogy, but I don't want to discuss pedagogical issues. I only want to assert that the impressions your home leaves on you plays an essential role for the learning process, especially for the younger generation.

Again and again, you will find how much a home, especially a good home, shapes people. It is sad for those who lack a home. The older the person, the more painful it will be for them because increasing age reduces their adaptability.

I remember a conversation that I had with my son during his medical training. We were discussing the difficulties involved in diagnosing patients. His professor had told students what to do when struggling to see why an elderly patient suffers pain. In this situation, the physician should ask their patient whether they have lived in the area for a long time, or where they had lived previously. If the elderly patient says that they had moved recently, the doctors should help them relax, and show empathy since they are very likely experiencing mental suffering—homesickness. Elderly people especially risk suffering homesickness if they have previously lived a long time in their own self-built house.

Many people have written and sung about feeling at home, or homesickness. In fact, there are still many things left that you could write or sing about being at home. The longing for travel is only one among many others. By contrast, there is no suffering like homesickness. There are thousands of ways to satisfy your longing for travel, but there is only one way to quench your longing for home.

Yet, we had lost our home a long time before leaving the Soviet Union. In 1930, we had been deprived of our home. But we are now happy that we have found a land that is taking care of us like a mother. Who knows whether we will ever feel at home in this motherland?

Today Is September 21, 1992

[350] From today onwards, I want to try to provide an account of our experiences during our pilgrimage in Germany from 1979 to today, about 13 years. These events might be interesting.

The first house in Germany (it was still West Germany at that time) was located in a small town that is in the very south of the country. It is close to the French and Swiss borders. The small Kandern River flows along both sides of the town named after it. There are no manufactures in Kandern. The town is kept as a recreational area, and suits this purpose well. It lies in a valley surrounded by a series of forests. It is calm and cozy. In the highest part, there is a street called Roter Rain running close to the forest. Our first apartment was in house number 4. It was a two-room apartment of about 72 m². You had a wonderful view of the forest nearby, and in the green meadow between, a flock of sheep grazed summer and winter. It was a beautiful apartment. However, we had some problems with it. All official buildings and shops were located in the centre of the town's residential area, but our house was in the higher part. It became more and more difficult for us to take our heavy, full shopping bags or cart uphill the almost one kilometre back to our home. That was too much for our hearts that possibly were already overwhelmed by starting a new life here. Heinrich often helped us with his car but he couldn't do this on a regular basis. Our apartment was well equipped with every necessity in our space: living room, bedroom, washroom, corridor, and storeroom. We had bought some pieces of furniture at the very beginning of our stay, and taken other pieces from the bulk garbage, and repaired them. In short, our apartment was modestly and simply equipped without luxury—just what we wanted. We did not want to attract attention. We did not want to have or do anything that would draw the attention of the locals. We wanted to carefully observe how people lived in Germany, and adjust to anything that was different from Russia, or things we did differently there. We had been forced to live among Russians for 50 years. We were now eager to adhere to our motto of having a quiet life being German among Germans!

Our material circumstance was never a problem in Germany. In the beginning, we received an advance on our pension, and later sufficient each month. The people greeted us very politely, and they were helpful, benevolent, wonderful, and unusually friendly. Sometimes it was even annoying.

[351] How was our health? Upon our arrival in Germany, we were tired—exhausted. The last month (May) had been very demanding as we prepared to move. We were really worn out when we arrived. Our hearts were overwhelmed. Here we received high quality medical treatment. The doctors sent us to a hospital several times, and managed to restore our hearts. In 1988, they implanted a pacemaker, and I feel much better now. I even feel good. However, they couldn't cure everything. My legs are still not good. I did not get rid of my rheumatism. The climate of Germany is very humid, and aggravates rheumatism. In the end, my entire body suffers from rheumatism since the rheumatic body does not move enough. However, I am still relatively fine. I am still able to take care of my wife, who suffers much more than me. My radiculitis also became less severe.

We have a curious way of living. Whenever I need lay down in my bed, my dear wife feels better, and the other way around. Whenever my wife needs to lay down, I am recovered to the degree that I can run the house again. That is curious.

We had the opportunity to move to another apartment located in the centre of the town. It was an excellent two-room apartment of about 75 m². Now all essentials were close to us: post office, doctor's office, city hall, shops, banks, market, even the police station that

we hardly need. The apartment was not cheap. The monthly rent was 700 to 750 deutschmarks. However, our pension was enough so that we even had some money left over, and our savings gradually increased.

We were only unsettled by two problems. First of all, our general health worried us, even though no part of our body suffered from a specific disease. Nonetheless, we gradually became weaker. Secondly, our son, who visited us every year, did not show any interest in moving to Germany. We were afraid that he would delay until it would be too late. We were concerned by his attitude. Also, our siblings did not show any interest in moving to Germany.

My brother Gerhard felt urged to leave the Caucasus to move to Slavgorod. We supported him in buying a house there, and relaxed. As long as he was happy, we were fine with his decision. [352] Each man to his own! Yet, we were disappointed by his attitude. In the end, it would be too late for him to leave. We notice how our vitality was diminishing. Heinrich and Margaret sometimes helped us.

Then Heinrich got a new job offer. He accepted it, and informed us that they would be leaving Kandern soon. At that point, our son had finally decided to move here. His first attempt to do so did not work out. The German immigration laws had changed, and it became much more difficult to obtain permission to immigrate to Germany. In Russia, the political situation changed dramatically, which made it even more difficult to immigrate to Germany. Now everyone eventually wanted to immigrate to Germany. This situation became critical. Meanwhile, my wife got severely sick. When my son David with our grandchildren visited us in February/March 1991, my wife had a breakdown. After experiencing a stroke on 15 March, she was confined to bed. In particular, she struggled to urinate. From this day onward, I never left her alone. Our son and grandson Eduard travelled back to Russia on 17 March. I stayed alone with my ill wife. I had to change the bedlinen every hour and a half, and had to wash and iron it. I also had to prepare food that I needed to buy in the grocery store, and do many other things. I liked to take care of my wife, but it was very stressful. I was able to do this until April 1992. By then I was then completely exhausted. Heinrich and I booked an appointment in a retirement home in Lörrach. We could move there in six months. My wife and I could have lived there paying 4,500 deutschmarks per month. However, Hans and Anna Bartel visited us, and were completely opposed to this plan. They offered for us to stay with them. In this way, we moved to Schloss Holte-Stuckenbrock where Hans and Anna had a spacious place to live. Our entire household was dissolved. Hans was finished with building his new house on 25 October. They had worked a lot, and now had a perfect house with five living rooms, a kitchen, two washrooms and so forth. In short, they owned a superb home in the small town of Augustdorf. We moved in on 25 October 1992. In the meantime, my wife had been hospitalized from 2 August to 2 September 1992, an entire month. It seemed that her health improved only a little. We visited her every day. She had not regained her memory, and still could not walk. The doctors gave her a catheter that made caregiving much easier. She now was confined to bed. We could talk, but she did not recognize me most of the time. Nevertheless, I still fed her three times a day because she was not able to eat on her own. [353] She had insulin injections twice a day. Apart from this, she had to take four different medicines. Her blood sugar kept increasing, and the medicines did not help. Our local

doctor (his name was Raschke) visited regularly. On 3 November 1992 my wife experienced a second stroke. She lost her hearing and her capacity to speak. On 11 November, the doctor visited. He measured her blood sugar at 500-600 units. Without delay, she was brought to the hospital. I stayed with her. Her level of sugar diminished, but her left leg was affected by a very painful thrombus. They did everything that they could for her. However, their efforts were futile. On Saturday 14 November, the doctors gave up. That was her birthday. The next day, she passed away at 11 am. Her heart stopped. My dear, dear wife, our mother, had ended the fight. She died!

During the time of her suffering, she had often groaned, but she had never complained about pain. She had also maintained her regular diet in the hospital until her last days. She was an exceptionally calm and acquiescent patient. I would have liked to continue to take care of her.

The funeral took place on Friday 20 November. I had asked Jakob Bartel, and Hans and Anna to take care of everything. I wanted them to organize the funeral of their cousin and aunt according to their wishes. They hired a funeral home. Their services costed 7,000-8,000 deutschmarks in total. My wife was well prepared for the grave, fully clothed in white. There was much singing in the chapel during the funeral service. It reminded me of the way we used to do funerals. They bought a place for my grave besides Katja, mommy, or my wife. Call her as you wish! Who knows when I will need to go there? That reminds of the following wise adage, "You can travel around the entire world; however, fate decides where you are born, and where you will die." My situation was not exceptional, but people always had such experiences. During my youth, we already sang the following song.

I saw the spring. I greeted the flowers. I listened to the nightingale's song and kissed a lovely girl.

I sang about the spring, and I loved the flowers. My beloved girl went to the grave, and nightingale's song kept silent.

Oh, heavenly Lord, you deprived me of my beloved one. Indeed, there might be many other girls, but no one like her.

Here, she lays covered by soil, and flowers blossom on her grave.
Alas, I wish I could see her again who once gave me roses.

The dear spring will return, the lovely flowers will blossom again.
The nightingales will sing again; yet, my dear Katja will never return.

It will take a long time until I accept that my wife, my most steadfast friend, does not live anymore. I might never be able to accept this. Katja lived for 83 years. We were married for 62 years and eight months. Our wedding day was on 31 March 1930.¹ Our silver wedding anniversary was in 1950. Our golden wedding anniversary was in 1980.

¹ *Written in the margin:* We got to know each other in 1925. From this time onwards, we were committed to each other in love and loyalty.

Our diamond wedding anniversary was in 1990. Her funeral was on 20 November 1992. We had a good married life together. Thanks be to God.

Eulogy

[354] Oh, my dear Katja. Why did you have to leave me in this way? My wife died on 15 November 1992 at 11 am. I will never forgive myself for not staying with her when Anna Bartel and I visited her in the hospital in Detmold on 13 November 1992. Katja lay in her bed. The thrombus was probably painful. Her leg appeared to be thinner than usual. Anna thought that it was a good sign, but I wasn't reassured. I wondered whether a small blood clot might have caused the severe effect. I kept quiet, and we came back to Augustdorf. I had made an unpardonable, unforgettable, and incorrigible mistake. I should have stayed with my wife in the hospital. We also planned to visit her on her 83rd birthday on Saturday, 14 November but we were somehow prevented from doing that. That was also an unpardonable mistake. So Katja was alone on Saturday. On Sunday, they called us to the hospital and we went, but we were too late. When we arrived, Katja had already passed away. We came too late, now too late forever! Her body was still warm. The physician had not expected her death. They diagnosed that she had experienced a lung embolism. My fears of Friday had been justified. My wife had died all of a sudden. She had not been in agony for long. She had been unable to utter any sound because of her deafness. She had died in silence without anyone noticing. Katja would not even have been able to speak to me for one last time. However, I might have noticed her death. The doctors believed that my wife's cognitive capacity had rapidly declined with the second stroke. She had not reacted to anything on Saturday. Yet I had not stayed with her during her last minutes. I will never forgive myself. I will regret for the rest of my life that I had left my wife alone during her last minutes. That is a hard pill for me.

We had known of each other since 1923. We became good friends, and two years later we were willing to marry. On 31 March 1930 we married in front of the marriage altar including the vow, "Till death do us part". From this day on, we spent every day together for 62 years and seven and a half months, except during the war. I now have to admit that I failed to adhere to my promise at the last minute. That is unpardonable. Unfortunate circumstances were the reason for my mistake.

Who was Katja? What did she mean to me? Katja was a very poor girl with bright, curly hair, and a long, thick braid when she came to Nordheim in 1921. She was the only daughter of her parents. Her father was Peter Bartel. [357] In 1920-1921 she often suffered from hunger. Why was this girl supposed to be my wife for my whole life? Indeed, I wanted to learn how to love this girl, who seemed to be a poor girl on the surface. I didn't want to leave her to any other man. We both became very happy together having a peaceful married life for 62 years, seven and a half months. Katja was not only my wife, but was also my most steadfast friend. We were always open with each other helping us to avoid conflicts. This prevented things from taking us by surprise. We did not keep secrets.

My wife was very thrifty, but also generous and helpful. Whenever possible, we worked together. We did a little better than most people who were like us in tough times because she managed our earnings and supplies very well. Honestly, without Katja's support after our marriage, I would not have had the time to study to become a teacher. I could completely rely on her in terms of managing our affairs. Katja did even better than me in this area of life. She was able to manage with very little money. She was also able to get more from less because she was unbelievably hardworking and skillful. She was especially interested and knowledgeable in doing handwork. She used to darn, knit, crochet, spin, sew, and became a trained seamstress. In particular, Katja enjoyed cooking and baking. I often wondered what Katja could not do. She certainly didn't avoid any work at home, on the yard, on the field, or in the garden. Katja worked hard, was capable, and very diligent.

In Germany, she read many books. Then we had the time to discuss the books we read. We could talk for hours while Katja sat or reclined in her soft, comfortable chair. How often we sang together! From our youth we loved to sing. We both were deemed to be passionate singers. After my wife had become sick and frail, I liked to take care of her. When she was confined to bed, I fed her for two years. I took care of Katja, and she showed her gratitude with her friendly, contented character. My wife benefitted from not having pain either in her limbs, nor in her body. She was also very patient. We both became aware that we had to part from each other at some point because of disease. That is the destiny of being human. It rarely occurs that both spouses pass away at the same time. Nonetheless, I can hardly bear the death of my beloved wife and my most steadfast friend. I know that Katja died happy, and therefore quietly. I hope that God will help me overcome my grief.¹

[356] Now I will move on to Katja's life in Germany. Our parents already aspired to immigrate to this country. For many years we fancied Germany to be the homeland of our ancestors. In short, we have been deceived. But we never regretted this step. Indeed, Germany is the richest country in the world at present. Why would someone not enjoy living there? That Germany is an excellent country can be agreed upon by both native Germans, and recent immigrants, whether short- or long-term. Whatever is done in Germany is done well. They make an incredible number of things here, so many it's unimaginable, from the smallest to the biggest. You can buy anything you want. The workers, employees, and state officials have high salaries. Thousands of people are content with their pensions. I wonder that my heart still misses anything.

But I miss the most important thing just like other people. I yearned and looked forward to it the most when we boarded the plane to take us from Russia to Germany 13 years ago. I have been looking for the home I have been picturing in my head for those 13 years. I thought that I would easily find it in Germany but I still have not found it. It will be hardly possible for me to find a place in Germany where I will feel at home, considering that I

¹ *Written in the margin:* God came to the wise conclusion that you had to part from what you love the most, although there is nothing in the world that hurts the heart more than parting from someone. In heaven, all dilemmas that caused the shedding of tears will be solved. After returning to your Father's home, you will understand why He did it in this way.

have a grave to visit here. I am talking about the grave of my dearest Katja where I bought a future plot for me. (From a human point of view, I will then be laid beside her in the womb of the earth.) Considering that I will also soon leave this world, it seems to me that I will feel like we both will decay as strangers under a foreign ground. No, Germany has not become my new home even though we, Germans, all believed that we belong to Germany. I wonder if it could still happen. The next generation, might be able to feel at home in Germany. Do you wonder whether all German-Russians feel this way? I don't know. Most whom I have met here have similar emotions. Am I unhappy that I have immigrated to Germany? Do I regret that I left Russia? A strong, "No" to both questions. But you could say that I'm still not satisfied with my description of how I felt in such few words.

From the first encounter with the flight attendants onwards, we already sensed we would come to a country where everything was different from our home in Russia. We had to do things differently than we were used to. Later experiences showed that our first impressions were accurate. That did mean that things were neither worse nor better in Germany. We did not know what this meant for us at that point. [357] We had to experience it. We had to learn it. So, we paid attention to everything, and learned. As teachers, we were aware that not everyone is capable of learning to the same extent. Whoever asks questions immediately when they haven't understood something will learn more quickly. That was our problem, or to be more precise, my problem. We were people who already knew how to manage. But now we were supposed to be keen to learn new things. We were shy and lacked courage even though people were nice to us. At our first meeting with local Germans, we were surprised by their positive attitude toward Germans-Russian, but we still felt a bit embarrassed. When we went to the different institutions for the first time, some officials were positively surprised that we were good at speaking everyday German. That made us glad. However, after receiving the first forms to fill out, and the first journals to read, we realized that we had not brought a broad vocabulary from Russia to Germany. During our first weeks in Germany, I already bought the first, seventh, and tenth editions of *Duden*¹. In particular, the language of bureaucracy was, and still is difficult. It is much easier to communicate in the shops and markets. Anyone back in Russia who think they still have a good command of German will be disappointed. Likewise, habits, customs, and many other things are different. I am not suggesting that everything is worse here. Things are just different. There is barely an area of life where you do not encounter differences. Consider the following. Imagine you are going to your neighbour to ask for information or something. You ring the bell. Someone comes to the door. The neighbour asks, "How can I help you?" and so forth. That might evolve into a conversation. However, your neighbour would never ask you to come in. Hence, you might talk with each other for hours, standing at the door or on the path. It is very unlikely that you are invited to enter the abode of someone you do not know. You would have to be a very special guest to be invited in. State officials, or mail carriers are reluctant to enter private living spaces. You are hesitant to cross someone else's yard, even if it is your next-door neighbour's. What can I say? It is what it is. Are you allowed to borrow something from other people? You might only be able to ask your relatives. But people will direct you, or point the right way when you are lost, and smile politely. Every German does that independent of their age everywhere you

¹ A German dictionary.

go, on the street, or in an office. For a German-Russian, it is not difficult to address a woman as Miss [*Fräulein*] or Mrs. [*Frau*]. By contrast, they might find it difficult to address every male in the same way. It does not matter how old the man is or to what degree you know him. [358] The official who worked in the welfare agency noticed that I was puzzled at our second meeting. He was a benevolent elderly gentleman who had a friendly smile. He explained, "During the war, I was in Russia for a while. Everyone addressed their interlocutor as comrade. You are still accustomed to this way of speaking. We address every male person as *Herr* (meaning Mr.). In this context, *Herr* (meaning master) is not the opposite of *Knecht* (meaning servant) and so on. We all are the masters of ourselves. We are free and equal. Everyone does what they like. However, if you breach the law, you will be penalized accordingly. The laws are open to the public. You only have to familiarize yourself with them. In Germany, no one has the right to forbid something. Every law has resulted from a democratic process, and they apply to everyone. All are equal before the law. Germany is a state based on law. You will get used to it, Mr. Toews." In this way, Comrade Toews has transformed into Mr. Toews by moving from Russia to Germany. I got quite used to it over the years.

Everything in Germany is highly regulated. You always have pages of instructions or rules, and you need to know and follow them. Otherwise, you might breach the law so that you will be penalized. There were regulations for how to sort your garbage, how to plant flowers, how to take care of trees, how to keep order in your yard, how to clean your house, how to fence your property, how to build a house or barn. In case you break a rule, you will get into trouble. At first, you might think that people have a hard time adhering to all those rules, regulations, and laws, but this isn't the case. New citizens like us, however, struggle to learn this pile of regulations quickly. Obviously, no law code has several volumes of hundreds of pages at the time of its institution. The law codes gradually become thicker, even happening by accident. Life, and the various behaviours displayed by humans determine law, so to speak. In this way, rules gradually appear one after the other to meet the needs of life in civilized society. I imagine that this development gives rise to conditions where people are not only used to obeying the rules, laws, regulations, and etc., but also feel that they need them. But to us, this pile of regulations felt like heavy rain showering on our dirty heads. We German-Russians found these rules pedantic and annoying. It was difficult to breathe freely while being blanketed by rules and laws. I hope that this feeling of being overwhelmed will turn out to be temporary. If everything is regulated, life must be easier than in chaotic Russia.

[359] It is taking time to discern the differences between living in Germany and Russia, and it even takes more time to adjust to a new way of life. I doubt that I will live long enough to succeed. Consequently, some, if not many things will remain problematic and odd for me, even though they are deemed to be simple and ordinary to Germans. Indeed, I doubt that I will ever be able to overcome the feeling of being a stranger. Suppose I grow apart (in fact I might have already grown apart) from Russia where I felt at home. In that case, I will lose my sense of belonging, especially if I am not able to develop an attachment to Germany. I feel this homelessness stronger and stronger after the death of my beloved wife (alas, Katja). It seems to me that half of my vitality and joy of life was destroyed, and now lays in ruins before me.

In Kandern we often discussed with Heinrich and Margaret Toews whether people exist who are yearning, looking for death. We concluded that such people usually do not exist. But people can come to a point where they wonder whether it might be better for them to die. In theory, every person wants to live. Indeed, I believe that only unfixable problems and heartbreak are the cause of suicide. I wonder who would dare say that they can be sure of this. It is impossible to understand how dying people feel. So let us not dive into this issue. Everyone experiences death in their own way.

However, we all want to live. In order to have a good life you need abilities that not everyone possesses. You need to be able to quickly adapt to change. Moreover, you need courage. You sometimes even need to be audacious. Unfortunately, I lack all these qualities. A local German said to me recently, "If you want to achieve something in life, you need to be bold, if not audacious, and resilient." By contrast, I succeeded in life by my modesty and hard work, so it is difficult for me to adapt. Hard work? Why do you need hardworking people? There is no need for people like me. Just give us a sufficient pension that enables us to have a decent life so that we can pay our rent and buy food, clothing, shoes, furniture, and kitchen equipment. In other words, we need enough money to afford the necessities so we don't have to worry or aspire to more. It is difficult to get used to this comfortable situation. As a result, you experience boredom, monotony, uncertainty, and so forth.

[360] Today it is 20 December 1993 and Christmas week has begun. For the first time, we are going to celebrate Christmas at our new home. Hans and Anna's children decorated a truly wonderful Christmas tree. They were incredibly well equipped to do this. Everyone, even me, is looking forward to Christmas. How could I avoid remembering the past? Christmas has always been a family celebration. Everyone returns home for Christmas wherever they are because your home is always the best place. This deeply rooted tradition also applies to the family where I am living. Where is my family? I am treated as family here in Hans' and Anna's household. That is good!! But where is my own son, my only child? Where is Eduard Toews, my only grandson, and Svetlana, my only granddaughter? And where is my dear Katja, once the mother of our small family? She is away. She does not count anymore because of her death. She is separated from us.

She was removed from her earthly home. I need to accept this. After passing their allocated time, their life-breath leaves, and they become a part of eternity. I need to accept it, indeed. But where are the remaining members of my family who made their lives difficult, if not unbearable because of their carelessness and thoughtlessness? Maybe, they have messed up their lives forever. Why have I even started to talk about this? I can't see when this torture will end. At the right time, they could have emigrated so easily, without difficulty. Now it is unsolvable. The wise adage of our ancestors says, "If you are unwilling to do something, you will be unable or forbidden to do it later." The other is "Do not ignore your parents' advice." Apart from this, time flows on.

Time is always moving. Moments immediately disappear. Every moment not used is lost forever. Those of us who do not use a day harm the earth because they do not use the power that God has given them. My brother Gerhard and my sister Liese escaped their biggest misery. They arrived in Germany together Gerhard's children, Elvira, Gerhard

(junior), and the family of his daughter, Lene. They have been lodged in emergency accommodation in Münster. They are doing fine given these circumstances. However, they do not have an easy life since my sister Liese became deathly ill immediately after arriving in Germany. She suffers from a cancer of her internal organs (it might be liver cancer). Her time on earth is up. We have to expect that she will die soon. It is too late for her. She will not get to know Germany even a little bit.

Yes, the immigration of German-Russians to Germany is getting more and more difficult. Germany has enough. The German-Russians have become mostly assimilated into Russian society. You have to pity these German-Russians. [361] What is the reason for this? The German-Russians are not interested in living as Germans among Germans. Instead, they want to improve their material conditions. There is no good reason for them to emigrate. They have already become too Russian. Only elderly German-Russians are able to speak German since they still remember their mother tongue from childhood. The children of German-Russian who attend school in Germany speak German very well. The middle-aged German-Russian have the most difficulty speaking German, although they are most in need of good German skills for employment. Nonetheless, they struggle. To their own disadvantage, they still speak Russian at home long after their arrival. This generation is also not eager to practice reading German. You notice that local Germans are often disappointed by them. Consequently, German-Russians are considered here as “Russians.” Recently immigrated German-Russians rarely return to Russia despite the fact that they have a hard time succeeding in German society. They call themselves *Russkie* [Russians].

On 28 December 1993, we buried my dear sister Liese in the graveyard of Martin’s Church in Münster, where my brother Gerhard’s family lives in emergency accommodation. She had arrived in Germany around 20 July.

Today we celebrate New Year’s Day. The year 1995 has begun. As usual, I sit alone in my room. I drank my evening tea on time as always. At 6 pm, I always have my singing hour. At first, I have sung the New Year’s song today. I also sang it yesterday on New Year’s Eve. We used to sing this song at my parent’s home on these two days as well.

Full of thoughts, we stand at the border of the new year,
We are looking at the new year ahead of us.
Will it fulfill our wishes?
Will it meet our expectations?
Or will it stir up the hatred of our enemies?
Will it bring worries and sorrows to us?
Our eyes cannot foresee what it will bring.
There is still only a dark night ahead of us.
Yet, there is sunshine behind us.
Should we turn around to look back?
We then see ... what happiness.
We see nothing else than grace and true happiness.

Whenever we did not have happy days in the past year, we remembered Ecclesiastes 7:14, “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God also has made the one as well as the other, so that man should find nothing after him.”

When my wife was still alive, and we sang together on special occasions, we often wondered after we were gone, who would sing these beautiful songs that made our life so beautiful. Who would continue to sing them? I am the only remaining member of my family. My brother Gerhard sometimes sings with me, but... For everything there is a season. His voice has become weak, and he doesn't remember all the verses. I have to use the simple past tense. My brother Gerhard used to be an excellent singer. Where are those who once sang here so beautifully?¹

David Toews died 21 October 2002.

¹ *Written in the margin:* I am in good hands in this house. I get everything that I need punctually. However, they do not sing. They also rarely read.